



AGAINST EMPIRE

against empire

against empire

tom wilson in conversation with many

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From the river to the sea...

...Palestine will be free.

Acknowledgement of Country

I acknowledge the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin Nation as the Traditional Custodians of the land on which RMIT's City campus stands, and on which this work was created. This land is stolen; sovereignty has never been ceded.

I recognise that colonisation in so-called Australia is ongoing — through cultural genocide, dispossession, incarceration, systemic marginalisation, and the continued erasure of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

I pay my respects to Elders past and present, and to First Nations communities whose survival, resistance, and cultural strength endure despite this violence.

I also acknowledge that RMIT, as an institution, exists on stolen land and continues to benefit from colonial structures, including its partnerships with extractive and militarised industries.

Beyond Country

Genocide and systemic violence are not confined to this land. The same colonial and militarised logics that dispossessed Indigenous peoples here reverberate through a global order. These atrocities are not identical events, but each enacts the structural grammar of racial capitalism and colonial governance: elimination, partition, segregation, and extraction. These issues are bound to the wider order of settler-colonial capitalism and apartheid that organises the global present.

RMIT is not neutral in this order, it is an accomplice. Through its Sir Lawrence Wackett Defence & Aerospace Centre and industry partnerships with weapons corporations including Boeing, BAE Systems, Thales and Rheinmetall, the university collaborates with and legitimises the very companies whose bombs and drones massacre civilians overseas.

When students and staff demand accountability, RMIT responds with repression. Posters for Palestine are torn down and meetings are cancelled, all to protect the university's standing with arms dealers. Meanwhile, Vice-Chancellor Alec Cameron takes home more than 1 million AUD a year, even as the university runs in deficit. His leadership makes clear that profit, prestige, and corporate loyalty are valued above human life.

This is not education in service of liberation. It is education weaponised in service of empire. RMIT is a settler-colonial institution built on stolen Indigenous land and actively sustaining the global infrastructures of apartheid, militarisation, and genocide. To study, write, or make art here is never innocent. Until the university divests from every weapons manufacturer and every defence contractor, it remains an institution of war profiteering, complicit in dispossession here, and in mass death across the globe.

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Through confrontation with the urgencies of the present, I have sought to map the terrains of power in order to elude their dialectical capture—to refuse both style and the stylisation of refusal itself. Such labour is necessarily perilous: it moves without the consolation of commodity or completion, sustained only by the unrest that it demands. To live in pursuit of truth—to seek the possibility of resistance within domination—is to affirm not the hope of redemption but persistence. As Adorno reminds us, *there is no right life in the wrong one*; yet perhaps the gesture toward such life, precisely in its impossibility, marks the minimal trace of the right within the wrong.

Chapter 1

Burden

The aesthetic burden names the indistinction of domination and sensibility—the point at which the very capacity to perceive is structured by the forces it believes itself to apprehend. What is felt as taste, discernment, or refusal is not the residue of autonomy but the expression of an order sedimented in the faculties of perception. Power does not stand outside the subject, issuing commands; it resides within the grammar of feeling itself, arranging the conditions under which judgment appears as freedom.

In this configuration, sensibility is not a supplement to reason nor a counterforce to discipline; it is discipline's most intimate articulation. The refinement of perception is inseparable from the refinement of subjection. Every mode of seeing bears the trace of instruction; every instance of feeling repeats a form of compliance already absorbed as spontaneity. The subject's pleasure in discernment—its certainty of aesthetic rightness—testifies not to emancipation but to the successful interiorisation of rule.

The aesthetic burden therefore designates a structure without exterior. It is neither historical deception nor ideological mask but the mode in which power attains consistency as life. The aesthetic does not conceal power; it realises it at the level of affect, transforming subjection into the immediacy of response.

Critique, within such an arrangement, cannot pretend to innocence. The very act of recognition reaffirms the conditions

of recognisability. To discern the mechanism is to rehearse it; to describe complicity is to extend its discourse. The reflex of exposure belongs to the same circuitry it illuminates, its lucidity another form of attachment. Consciousness does not annul the structure but perfects its repetition. The aesthetic burden is thus the persistence of power as comprehension—the movement by which thought confirms what it would negate.

This text proceeds within that paradox. It does not seek resolution in negation or redemption through awareness but dwells in the zone where perception folds upon itself, where critique and complicity converge as the same gesture differently named. Its method is not liberation but exactitude: to trace the operations of discipline within sensation, of law within taste, of order within the smallest movements of attention.

What follows treats the aesthetic not as object or category but as a diagram of governance—a field in which the visible and the felt coincide as techniques of alignment. To think within this field is already to suffer its logic; to speak of freedom is to feel its constraint. The aesthetic burden is that intimacy: the indistinguishability of perception and power, of recognition and reiteration, of thought and its captivity.

Discipline of Taste

Taste is not an instinct but an inheritance. It is the sedimented expression of history through sensation—the survival of social

order as pleasure, the body's memory of its own subjection. As Bourdieu writes, "cultural needs are the product of upbringing and education" (1984:2). Taste does not emerge from freedom but from training; its origins are pedagogical, not personal. What the liberal imagination calls individuality is the internalisation of distinction, the translation of necessity into choice.

The illusion of freedom—the bourgeois conviction that taste expresses autonomy—is, as Bourdieu observes, "so closely associated with the idea of freedom that many people find it hard to grasp the paradoxes of the taste of necessity" (1984:178). Taste feels free precisely because it is compelled. The aesthetic subject moves within what Bourdieu calls a forced choice, *amour fati*: "the choice of destiny... produced by conditions of existence which rule out all alternatives as mere daydreams" (1984:178–179). One learns to love what one is permitted to desire.

The opposition between "the tastes of luxury" and "the tastes of necessity" (Bourdieu, 1984:177) conceals a deeper complicity. Both operate as technologies of moral orientation rather than as simple class expressions. In late capitalism, the aesthetic field no longer divides neatly between those freed from necessity and those bound to it; instead, each learns to aestheticise their own constraint. Detachment becomes a performative ethic of taste—refinement as moral restraint—while endurance is rebranded as authenticity, resilience, or grit. The bourgeois

ascetic and the working-class stoic now share a common grammar of self-discipline, differently adorned but structurally homologous. Pleasure itself is moralised: to feel rightly, to consume correctly, to signal the proper balance between indulgence and restraint. As Bourdieu notes, “pure pleasure—ascetic, empty pleasure... becomes a symbol of moral excellence” (1984:491). Sensibility becomes salvation; refinement, a mark of ethical composure.

This secular moral order survives under the name of art. As Hal Foster observes, “autonomous art is, in part, a secret substitute for religion—that is, a secret substitute for the moral disciplining of the subject that religion once provided” (1996:52). Yet the Enlightenment’s redirection of devotion was never complete. What persists within art is not merely a displaced faith but a palimpsest of older powers—colonial, theological, patriarchal—recast in aesthetic form. The aesthetic field inherits the church’s grammar of salvation and empire’s taxonomy of taste; its promise of freedom conceals the same imperative to order the self, to civilise desire, to make perception proper. Under late capitalism, these residues converge into a single moral economy of sensibility, where discernment replaces obedience and refinement performs virtue.

The pleasure of aesthetic rightness—what feels correct, sophisticated, or transgressive in the proper way—becomes the modern equivalent of piety. What presents itself as authenticity

is differentiation displaced: refinement masquerading as refusal. The avant-garde's pursuit of abjection or disorder repeats the same logic in negative form. "The avant-garde's refusal of all socially recognized tastes," Bourdieu writes, "rehabilitates, but at the second degree, the most derided forms of popular taste" (1984:94). Even negation becomes an index of belonging; the pleasure of dissent is simply the satisfaction of feeling properly deviant. Rebellion rehearses power's flexibility.

Discipline perfects this mechanism by turning obedience into aesthetics. "The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it," writes Foucault; "thus discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, 'docile' bodies" (1977:137). The same logic governs the sensorium. Perception is trained, corrected, and rewarded until feeling itself becomes docile. The subject's aesthetic confidence, the sensation of having taste, is the embodied trace of this education.

"Punishment," Foucault continues, "is only one element of a double system: gratification-punishment... the lazy being more encouraged by the desire to be rewarded" (1977:180). Taste functions as that reward, the gratification of feeling appropriate. To experience beauty, shock, or irony correctly is to affirm one's calibration to the field. The subject takes pleasure not in freedom but in the sensation of self-regulation.

Visibility sustains this arrangement. "It is the fact of being constantly seen... that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection," Foucault writes; "discipline had its own ceremony—the parade, the review, the ostentatious form of the examination" (1977:187–188). Sensibility becomes performance. The artist, critic, and spectator parade their refinement as proof of belonging, their refusal as evidence of literacy. Power, Foucault insists, "arranges things so that the exercise of power is not added on from the outside" (1977:206); it lives within the subject's pleasure itself.

Knowledge completes this interiorisation. "Power produces knowledge," Foucault writes; "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge" (1977:27–28). Taste is such a field: a structure that turns subjection into comprehension, regulation into judgment. The pleasure of understanding, of recognising what counts as profound, excessive, or banal, extends power's logic into thought. The subject who knows how to feel well exemplifies what Bourdieu called *habitus*: "embodied history, internalised as a second nature and so forgotten as history" (1984:56). The highest form of discipline is the disappearance of its own coercion.

Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* reveals the same dialectic within art's claim to freedom. "Artworks produced in freedom cannot thrive under an enduring societal unfreedom whose marks they bear even when they are daring," he writes (1970:206). What presents

itself as autonomy is “that specifically bourgeois trait of promising freedom while prohibiting it.” Even the most radical formal innovation bears the trace of domination’s grammar. The avant-garde’s negations, like the classical ideal’s harmonies, reproduce the world they seek to escape.

Taste, in this light, becomes power’s theological remainder, its capacity to survive as feeling after belief has fallen away. “Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier,” Bourdieu writes; “cultural consecration confers on objects and persons a sort of ontological promotion akin to transubstantiation” (1984:6–7). Culture still performs the miracle of elevation, turning social distinction into aesthetic truth.

The aesthetic burden names the perfection of this order. Instability is not deviation but design, the restless circulation of sensibility that persuades the subject of freedom precisely as it synchronises them to domination’s rhythm. What feels singular is only the system’s capacity for variation. In mistaking contradiction for autonomy, the self completes power’s circuit, embodying a structure it cannot distinguish from feeling. Taste, then, is not self-expression but self-discipline: the choreography of power performed beautifully. Its pleasure is the feeling of being correct, even in refusal. Its freedom is the elegance of constraint.

Technocapital Sensorium

The Aesthetic Burden finds its most insidious contemporary form in the total subsumption of refusal into the circulatory logic of technocapitalism. The promise of an unmediated freedom—a space of authentic critique, sensual liberation, or ironic distance—reveals itself as the system's most seductive and productive fantasy. Under this regime, every potential line of flight is pre-emptively formatted and re-channeled as a resource within the system's affective economy, creating a closed circuit where the desire for an "outside" becomes the very engine of our deeper immersion.

The foundational condition of this capture is what Mark Fisher termed capitalist realism: "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable system, but that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative" (Fisher, 2009:2). This is not merely an ideological failure but an affective and structural one, operating through a "pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture" (Fisher, 2009:9). Within this frame, the traditional avenues of opposition are systematically dismantled and repurposed.

Critique, for instance, is neutralised not through prohibition but through absorption. As Fisher notes, anti-capitalism itself becomes a style, "widely disseminated in capitalism" (Fisher, 2009:11). This leads to what Petrossiants & Rosales identify as the "anesthetization" of critique, where urgent writing about

oppression is appropriated until it loses its disruptive force (Petrosiants & Rosales, 2025:47). The act of exposure becomes a managed spectacle, feeding what Foucault described as the "perpetual spirals of power and pleasure" (Foucault, 1976:46). The critic, aware of their own complicity, often exemplifies Fisher's observation that capitalist realism "depends on the overvaluing of belief in the sense of inner attitude at the expense of the beliefs we exhibit in our behavior" (Fisher, 2009:35). We are, as Fisher puts it, "inserted at the level of desire in the remorseless meat-grinder of Capital" (Fisher, 2009:13), finding in our awareness a narcotic form of participation rather than a catalyst for action.

Simultaneously, the turn towards immediacy and sensuality—once championed by Sontag's call for an "erotics of art" against an interpretive tyranny that "makes art manageable, conformable" (Sontag, 1966:10)—has been ruthlessly instrumentalised. This shift is what Kornbluh diagnoses as the style of "immediacy," which "negates mediation to effect flow and indistinction" (Kornbluh, 2023:49). This "pulsing effulgence" purveys itself as spontaneous and free, but its imperative conceals a grind, merging artistic aspiration with the economic premiums of "gig labor" and "self-publishing" (Kornbluh, 2023:24). What Adorno foresaw is thus fulfilled: the delight in the "mere materiality of sound" becomes a "regression to the infantile" (Adorno, 1970:54), and the demand for immediate pleasure is one that art "is unable to grant what is expected of it"

(Adorno, 1970:320). The search for an unmediated authentic encounter merely reproduces, as Kornbluh argues, the very "economic premiums" of flexibility and fluidity that define the neoliberal subject (Kornbluh, 2023:24).

This capture extends to the core of the artistic object and the critical subject. Adorno's hope that art could stage an "object's rebellion against domination" (Adorno, 1970:225) or speak truth "through the wound it bears" (Adorno, 1970:247) presumed a cultural sphere with vestigial autonomy. That autonomy has been liquidated. Jameson argues that aesthetic innovation is no longer a refuge but is structurally assigned an "essential structural function" in the frantic production of "fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods" (Jameson, 1991:56). The artistic gesture, even in its most contemplative or reflexive form, is felt as "the announcement of an immediate praxis" (Adorno, 1970:13), a pre-packaged refusal that the culture industry "contrives to make that appear near and familiar" only after it has been "heteronomously manipulated" (Adorno, 1970:180). The result is what Jameson, describing pastiche, calls "blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs" (Jameson, 1991:65), where even irony is emptied of its subversive force.

The conclusion is as inescapable as the condition it describes: there is no exteriority. Foucault's axiom is the fundamental law of this affective economy: "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet... this resistance is never in a position of

exteriority" (Foucault, 1976:95–96). The system thrives on its own denunciation. It requires the energy of refusal, the style of transgression, and the performance of critique to renew its atmosphere of participation. The Aesthetic Burden, in its final stage, is the recognition that our sensorium is not just disciplined but productive—that every attempt to feel, refuse, or escape is already a form of value-generating labour within the very structure it seeks to oppose.

Colonial Afterimage

Empire persists as a perceptual order. It does not simply survive in institutions or borders but in the aesthetic infrastructures that continue to organise how the world appears and what it is possible to feel. Ariella Aïsha Azoulay describes imperialism as a "political and historical *a priori*" that shapes the very phenomenological field of experience (2019: 620–621). The aesthetic is one of its most enduring instruments, where the coordination of vision, judgment, and pleasure becomes the means through which domination is naturalised as sensibility.

Rinaldo Walcott notes that even the language of repair, such as repatriation, remains bound to this regime: the African or Black subject must re-enter "the European logic of aesthetics" to legitimise what is already theirs (Walcott in Petrossiants & Rosales, 2025: 101–102). His insistence that Black people must "continually desecrate modernity" names the necessity of violating this perceptual grammar rather than working within it.

Saidiya Hartman, drawing on Sylvia Wynter, identifies the aesthetic itself as part of Europe's "ontological cognitive colonising schema" (Hartman in Petrossiants & Rosales, 2025: 102–103). What is at stake is not simply taste or art but the formation of being—the production of subjects who learn to sense and to know through colonial distinctions between refinement and disorder, value and waste, civilisation and excess.

Azoulay extends this diagnosis to the modern category of art, where imperial hierarchies persist as expertise. The very distinction between art and craft, canonical and vernacular, continues to reproduce the division between those authorised to create value and those rendered as material for its demonstration (2019: 347–348). The museum and archive, in this sense, do not preserve culture; they aestheticise conquest. Every act of display repeats the gesture of possession, converting dispossession into care and violence into stewardship. As Azoulay writes, "imperial formations continue the logic of conquest by other means" (2019: 2). The neutrality of preservation is empire's most perfected aesthetic.

Within this order, affect functions as governance. Empire trains the body's reflexes—what Claire Fontaine calls the "commercial colonisation of the infrathin" (Fontaine in Petrossiants & Rosales, 2025: 88–89)—regulating the micro-movements of attention and desire. Sensibility becomes infrastructure. The pleasure of

recognition, the impulse to care, the reflex of empathy, all circulate through the same circuits of refinement that once distinguished the civilised from the primitive. The aesthetic burden is carried here as the continuous translation of domination into feeling.

Hartman exposes how this logic extends to value itself. The colonised subject is compelled to affirm the order of worth that devalues them, to “believe in it more than anyone else” (Hartman in Petrossiants & Rosales, 2025: 107–108). Refusing the order—refusing to care—is read as monstrous because it withdraws from the perceptual economy that sustains the world’s hierarchy of feeling. To not care, in this sense, is to desecrate modernity.

Azoulay describes how even acts of liberal care, archival rescue, humanitarian solidarity, and cultural preservation repeat imperial habits of moral distinction (2019: 693). Empathy and critique remain the aesthetic technologies through which domination reassures itself of its virtue. Decolonial gestures, conceived through progress and novelty, risk serving what Azoulay calls “imperialism’s progressive campaign for the new” (2019: 699). The drive to move forward reproduces the temporal logic of civilisation; the future becomes another colonial aesthetic.

This condition is not confined to institutions. As Rupal Oza and Rupal Natanel note, colonial ideologies continue to “operate within the multiple sites” of affect and critique itself (Natanel, 2023: 339). Feeling—belonging, unease, empathy—remains the

sensorium through which colonial power stabilises itself. Affective formations “normalise settler presence, privilege and power,” embedding them within both law and the body’s rhythms (Natanel, 2023: 340). Even rebellion is lived through these coordinates. Leanne Simpson captures the impasse succinctly: “If we accept colonial permanence, then our rebellion can only take place within settler colonial thought and reality” (Natanel, 2023: 342).

The affective structures of care and critique ensure that colonial permanence is not only acknowledged but continuously felt. The Aesthetic Burden designates this saturation. Empire does not simply leave a residue; it reproduces itself through the very faculties that register its critique. Taste, empathy, and discernment are not postcolonial achievements but ongoing expressions of the colonial aesthetic regime—mechanisms through which domination becomes pleasurable and moral virtue becomes its afterimage. The challenge is not to recover an uncorrupted sensibility, for none exists, but to recognise how perception itself functions as empire’s contemporary site of governance. To see, to feel, to care: these are no longer innocent acts. They are the means through which the colonial order sustains its own refinement.

Institutional Burden

Empire’s aesthetic order did not end with decolonisation; it was refined into the architectures that now arbitrate legitimacy. The

same infrastructures that once arranged bodies across continents now arrange feeling across disciplines. What was once a geography of conquest has become an architecture of care. Institutions of culture, politics, and pedagogy sustain this continuity. They do not simply manage art or knowledge; they manage perception itself, what can be seen, said, and felt as legitimate. Their authority depends on an aesthetic infrastructure that translates moral affect—responsibility, empathy, critique—into visible order. Within this order, power reproduces itself through the aestheticisation of virtue, the conversion of governance into sensibility.

Jacques Rancière calls this arrangement the distribution of the sensible, the system that “defines what is visible or not in a common space... a delimitation of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience” (2004: 13–14). Aesthetics, for Rancière, is not an optional discourse about art but “a mode of articulation between ways of doing and making, their corresponding forms of visibility, and possible ways of thinking about their relationships” (2004: 13). Institutions perform this articulation at scale. They choreograph the conditions of appearance: which forms of care count as ethical, which critiques as rigorous, which refusals as permissible. Legitimacy becomes a question of style, the calibration of sensitivity, critique, and restraint within the limits of institutional coherence. Policy statements, diversity reports, and curatorial

frameworks are not supplements to art; they are its conditions of visibility, the grammar through which moral life is rendered aesthetically legible.

Rancière describes this as a factory of the sensible, the production of a “shared sensible world” that is never simply communal but “a polemical distribution of modes of being and occupations in a space of possibilities” (2004: 66–67). The institution functions as that factory: it manufactures coherence by converting affective and moral labour into form. Its promise of inclusivity depends on delimitation; every gesture of inclusion presupposes the boundaries of what can appear.

Ariella Azoulay extends this logic to judgment itself. Curatorial and scholarly authority, she writes, depends on “a kind of assessment that evaluates the images and establishes whether a certain image is political, and another aesthetic” (2010: 246). The recurrent verdict—too aesthetic, too political—polices the moral contour of visibility. What passes as discernment is a choreography of feeling that aligns spectatorship with institutional virtue. The spectator, Azoulay observes, “denies her own contribution in creating the image as ‘aesthetic’ or ‘political’” (2010: 249); power thus naturalises its own sensibility. To feel rightly is to obey the architecture of judgment. Within this regime, ethical transparency itself becomes a mode of power, a performance of care that organises perception as evidence of virtue.

The moral economy of institutions relies on the performance of care. Diversity, inclusion, and social-justice initiatives operate as the visible expression of affective labour. Michael Rakowitz describes this as a system that “forces people to tell the same stories over and over and over again... but the institutions don’t listen,” exhausting participants “to the point where they just can’t relive these things anymore” (in Petrossiants & Rosales 2025: 38). Urgency becomes administration; empathy becomes procedure. Saidiya Hartman names this managed depletion, the orchestration of fatigue as a mode of governance. The institution extracts sincerity as a renewable resource: testimony and reflection circulate as proof that care is working.

Stephen Shukaitis notes that we “are constantly negotiating a set of ambivalent relationships with different institutions” (in Petrossiants & Rosales 2025: 41). One cannot stand outside; even critique becomes an instrument of calibration. Shellyne Rodriguez captures the paradox: “Culture is a gift and a curse. It can be a weapon for liberation, and the next minute it can be weaponized against you... The museum starts to perform the functions of displacement and development” (in Petrossiants & Rosales 2025: 47). The rhetoric of repair aestheticises the very violence it purports to redress. Care becomes cover; empathy becomes expansion. The aesthetic burden resides precisely in this conversion, when emotional labour and ethical posture become the raw materials of institutional growth.

Marina Vishmidt describes infrastructure as the site where value and virtue converge. "Attention to infrastructure," she writes, "is inseparable from the attempt to develop a materialist theory of conditions" (2025: 12). The institution's material condition is its aesthetic condition. Its languages of accountability—its gestures of care, reflexivity, and ethical posture—are not mere bureaucratic residue but modes of appearance: the surfaces through which power comes to look humane. Vishmidt's "reflective shimmer of a politically radicalised art" (2025: 18) names this dynamic exactly: critique becomes ambience, reflection becomes infrastructure. Hito Steyerl's circulationism and Azoulay's institutional neutrality converge here—transparency and accountability as the new aesthetic forms of authority.

Azoulay traces this neutrality to empire's bureaucratic legacies: "The establishment of the archive as a neutral technology and state institution made it a model... The institutionalisation of neutrality... enabled its accelerated propagation across contexts" (2019: 621). Neutrality is not absence of power but its aesthetic. What appears as openness or care functions as calibration, the continual adjustment of visibility so that critique is accounted for but never disruptive. Vishmidt calls this infrastructural critique: the incorporation of dissent into the institution's productive equipment (2025: 19). The system depends on critique as its aesthetic oxygen; resistance is already factored into its design.

Legitimacy is not a given but a product—an ongoing labour of coherence. As Vishmidt notes, in the speculative economy “the boundaries between art and labour become indistinct” (2025: 16). The artist, curator, and administrator are variations of the same labouring subject: reflexive, adaptable, emotionally fluent, performing responsibility as value. Institutions aestheticise this labour through atmospheres of accountability that translate ethics into visibility. Azoulay’s image of spectators “walking in and through art museums... asked to refrain from action while being invited to perform a certain type of action—bearing witness” (2019: 600) extends to every institutional participant. To inhabit the institution is to move through architectures that choreograph response, converting passivity into ethical posture. Witnessing becomes work; empathy becomes discipline.

Vishmidt observes that institutions “launder the imperative to extract profit while offering avenues of representation of alterity” (2025: 17). Inclusion functions as moral surplus, the aesthetic alibi of accumulation. The institution’s primary product is not art or knowledge but credibility, the moral glow of appearing responsive. Under these conditions, labour and legitimacy collapse into one another. The worker’s exhaustion, the curator’s reflection, the artist’s sincerity: all become aesthetic commodities in the moral economy of the field. The aesthetic burden here is the obligation to remain legible as good, to embody the institution’s coherence through one’s own fatigue.

Institutions of legitimacy sustain empire's perceptual order in administrative form. They aestheticise responsibility, transforming care, inclusion, and critique into infrastructures of virtue. What began as the colonial organisation of visibility survives as bureaucratic moral architecture. Every display of reflection renews the system that demands it; every gesture of dissent is folded back as proof of openness. Legitimacy operates as an aesthetic style, a harmony of virtue and visibility that converts power into sensibility and sensibility into labour. What remains to be thought is how this structure is lived: how the institution's aesthetic grammar enters the body as empathy, fatigue, and reflex. That descent marks the transition from infrastructure to affect, from the institution's choreography of feeling to the subject's exhaustion within it.

The Affectual Regime

If institutions organise what can be seen, affect organises what can be felt. It is the invisible order through which power circulates as sensation. Brian Massumi calls this the postmodern condition of power: domination that no longer persuades or disciplines but moves through the register of intensity itself. "Affect," he writes, "is an intrinsic variable of the late-capitalist system, as infrastructural as a factory" (1995:107). Feeling is not supplementary to structure; it is the structure, a sensory infrastructure where legitimacy is sustained through circulation rather than command. In this regime, emotion is not expression

but compliance; sensibility is the medium through which the social body is continuously adjusted to its own conditions.

Simon O'Sullivan defines affect as "a reaction in/on the body at the level of matter... the effect another body has upon my own body and my body's duration" (2001:126). It precedes language and intention, operating as the pre-cognitive mechanism through which subjects are tuned to the rhythms of the world. Power inhabits this immanence. It does not need to instruct; it modulates. To feel is to be organised. O'Sullivan's claim that "after the deconstructive reading, the art object remains... producing affects" (2001:125) captures this capture precisely; there is no opting out of the affective economy, no exterior to its circulation. Even critique becomes part of the same choreography of sensation it seeks to interrupt.

Affect thus functions as immanent control, a system in which responsiveness itself is the site of subjection. The spectator, the student, the citizen are not commanded to believe but to feel correctly. Sensitivity replaces ideology as the index of belonging. The moral subject of late modernity is one who reacts appropriately, who calibrates empathy, irony, and exhaustion to the tempo of the present. This calibration is not liberation from structure but its most intimate form.

Sara Ahmed describes this process as the moralisation of emotion. "Feeling rules," she writes, "establish the sense of entitlement or obligation that governs emotional exchanges"

(2010:240 n30). The injunction is not merely to act well but to feel well, to transform sensation into moral evidence. The good subject is one whose affective life aligns with institutional norms, who smiles when needed, who cares in the proper key.

"Happiness as a form of emotional labor," Ahmed observes, "is condensed in the formula: making others happy by appearing happy" (2017:59). Emotional fluency becomes a credential, a technique of governance masquerading as self-expression.

Ahmed's notion that "the labor is most successful when you become as happy as you appear" (2017:59) reveals the cruelty of this alignment. The self internalises performance until the distinction between expression and discipline dissolves. To care, to empathise, to smile are no longer gestures of relation but demonstrations of legitimacy. Power no longer represses feeling; it requires it. The obligation to feel becomes the contemporary form of mastery.

Ahmed locates the genealogy of this duty in Aristotle's definition of virtue: "to feel [emotions] when we ought... toward whom, and why" (2010:37). The good life is thus a life of affective precision, discipline rendered as grace. To be virtuous is to be affectively calibrated. This calibration extends into neoliberal rationalities, where freedom is recast as the management of one's own interiority. "Caring for oneself," Ahmed notes, "can become a technique of governance: the duty to care for one's self is often written as a duty to care for one's own happiness"

(2017:239). Feeling well is not autonomy but obedience disguised as wellness. The aesthetic burden endures here as the compulsion to aestheticise one's affect, to treat emotional self-regulation as both moral and aesthetic labour.

Lauren Berlant calls this state crisis ordinariness—the exhaustion of living within the demand to remain emotionally attuned while structurally powerless. "Working life," she writes, "exhausts practical sovereignty... life feels truncated, more like desperate doggy paddling than like a magnificent swim out to the horizon" (2011:115–116). Fatigue is not failure but the condition of participation. Exhaustion confirms sincerity, the visible proof that one's feeling has been properly invested. To be tired is to have cared enough; to care is to remain employable, empathic, legitimate.

This exhaustion functions as what Berlant elsewhere calls "the theater of compassion," where emotional intensity substitutes for material change (2011:182). Feeling deeply becomes the moral event that absolves responsibility for transformation. Empathy, cheerfulness, and despair circulate as currencies of civic virtue. "Scientific studies of workers," Berlant notes, "expanded corporate demands that employees not only be good at tasks but feel good" (2011:217). Emotional compliance replaces ideology as the measure of value. In this system, to feel less is to fall out of tune, to risk illegibility, unemployment, or moral suspicion.

Massumi's account of affective politics shows how this economy operates at scale. Reagan's performative fragility—"producing ideological effects by non-ideological means" (1995:102)—marked a shift from persuasion to transmission. Vulnerability itself became a medium of mastery. "Confidence," Massumi writes, "is the apotheosis of affective capture" (1995:104): the emotional translation of vitality into authority. Power no longer speaks through reason or ideology; it moves through atmospheres of empathy, fear, and optimism. Its cruelty presents as care, its mastery as responsiveness. Under this regime, to feel is to be governed.

The affectual regime perfects the aesthetic burden. It extends the institution's grammar of virtue into the intimate operations of the nervous system. Domination is no longer a command but a calibration, the tuning of intensity, anxiety, and optimism until they align with power's rhythm. Sensibility functions as governance; fatigue becomes its aesthetic. To appear sensitive, self-aware, and emotionally articulate is to meet the conditions of belonging. The subject's exhaustion, empathy, and reflexivity are not escapes from ideology but its contemporary expression, the residue of power felt as feeling. Within this field, liberation and compliance are indistinguishable: every movement toward authenticity deepens the choreography that demands it. The aesthetic burden endures not as representation but as atmosphere, the sensuous persistence of power after ideology.

Ontology of the Burden

At its deepest register, the aesthetic burden no longer describes what power does to perception but what perception has become under power's duration. It is the exhaustion of recognition itself. The mechanisms are no longer hidden: the neoliberal order, the institution, the grammar of care and critique—each has long been exposed. Yet this exposure does not undo them. It recirculates their logic, feeding the same reflexive machinery that thrives on its own unveiling. The repetition of insight has become the texture of power's persistence. To know the structure is to participate in its renewal.

Perception, under these conditions, is not neutral but recursive. The act of seeing folds back on itself, endlessly aware of its mediation, its implication, its historical weight. Reflexivity, once the promise of freedom, becomes the site of capture. Each attempt to unmask power only refines its vocabulary; each articulation of complicity another contribution to its archive. The aesthetic burden names this repetition: the compulsion to restate what has already been absorbed, to speak awareness as though awareness were not already the language of domination.

Sara Ahmed's notion of orientation clarifies this circularity. "Bodies take the shape of the histories that bring them near some objects and not others" (2006:54). The body's turns, its angles of approach, are histories rehearsing themselves. Even

critique has a posture. Foucault called this the care of the self, a discipline of attention so perfected that governance becomes indistinguishable from self-reflection. To tend to one's perception, to write about its conditioning, to feel the weight of implication: each gesture renews the circuit it seeks to trace.

Adorno's dictum—"there is no right life in the wrong one" (2005:39)—finds its aesthetic corollary here. There is no right seeing in the wrong world. Every form of recognition, even the most critical, reproduces the contours of what it beholds. The desire to resist becomes the affective proof of belonging. To critique the system is to sustain its rhythm; to feel implicated is to perform its sensitivity. In this sense, the writing of the aesthetic burden is itself burdened—it participates in the structure it names. Its reflexivity is not outside power but one of its most elegant expressions.

The aesthetic burden is thus the ontology of repetition: the endless return of awareness as style, of resistance as participation. No amount of critique, sensation, or self-knowledge rescues perception from its own conditions. Power's most enduring form is not domination but recurrence—the way it lingers in the cadence of recognition, in the pleasure of knowing better, in the gentle cruelty of feeling the weight of such a burden. To think or write the aesthetic burden is already to perform it.

Closing Notes

The aesthetic burden ends where perception can no longer distinguish critique from complicity. Awareness, refined to its limit, turns back upon itself, producing not clarity but exhaustion—the lucidity of a structure that cannot be exited. What remains is not revelation but endurance: the endless recognition that every gesture of discernment, every claim to sensibility, rehearses the grammar it seeks to escape.

To perceive is already to participate. Taste, critique, refusal, care—all are postures within the same choreography, movements through which domination feels alive as culture, as attention, as responsibility. Power's survival lies in its conversion into feeling: the capacity to be loved, mourned, and managed in the same breath. The subject becomes the medium of this refinement—its empathy, fatigue, and irony the instruments through which order maintains its rhythm.

The aesthetic burden, then, is not an error to be corrected but a condition to be named: the persistence of formation after ideology, of obedience after awareness. It is the weight of history still carried, the continuity of empire in the reflex of care, the endurance of hierarchy in the grace of discernment.

Interlude

Empty

Empty Exhibition Review

Brisbane, July 2025

An artist makes an artwork about emptiness.

Because the artwork about emptiness needs to be seen, the artist photographs it and posts it on Instagram about emptiness.

Because the post about emptiness needs an exhibition to give it weight, the gallery is prepared to display the artwork about emptiness.

Because the gallery must justify itself, photographs are taken of the install process showing people setting up the gallery for the artwork about emptiness.

Because the exhibition requires authority, a catalogue is written to accompany the artworks about emptiness.

Because the catalogue must itself exist as evidence, a photograph is taken of it mid-printing about emptiness.

Because the catalogue must be received as finished, another photograph is taken of it placed inside the gallery about emptiness.

Because the catalogue must be read, it is discussed by audiences and photographed again about emptiness.

Because the audience must be documented, another photograph is taken of the audience looking at the artwork about emptiness.

Because looking must be explained, the audience gathers for an artist talk, where they listen to the artist speak about the artwork about emptiness.

Because speaking must be validated, photographs are taken of the audience listening to the artist speak about the artwork about emptiness.

Because the event must circulate beyond the room, those photographs are posted to Instagram about emptiness.

An artist makes an artwork about emptiness.

Chapter 2

Asymptotia

Asymptote

- n. a straight line that continually approaches a curve but does not meet it at any finite distance.

Asymptotia (/æ.sɪmp'toʊ.ʃə/)

- n. a Kantian horizon of disaster; the recursive unworking of aesthetic position

After the exhaustion of the Aesthetic Burden, the question of movement becomes overwhelming. Every gesture of refusal, resistance, or renewal re-enters the very circuits it sought to escape. What once appeared as negation now serves as continuation; critique, as its own reproduction. The horizon of transcendence has collapsed, leaving only motion without destination. Yet this is not a paralysis, but the discovery of a new terrain: the perpetual, asymptotic unworking of the aesthetic disposition itself.

Jean-Luc Nancy reminds us that the denunciation of appearance can never escape appearance. "The denunciation of mere appearance effortlessly moves within mere appearance," he writes, because what calls itself proper or authentic must still manifest as semblance within the spectacle it contests (Nancy, 1993:24–25). Every critique of the frame presupposes the frame. The very outside we seek is already inside. This is not a failure but a condition: the "spacing" that makes relation possible. Thus, the collapse of transcendence reveals that the only tenable position is one that operates from within this saturation, turning the impossibility of an "outside" into the principle of its own immanent critique.

Asymptotia arises here: not as a philosophy of release or a programme for action, but as a theoretical description of self-unworking. It names the commitment to perpetually and asymptotically dismantle one's own aesthetic disposition—the

ingrained habits of perception, feeling, and judgement that constitute the Aesthetic Burden. Where the Aesthetic Burden traced the saturation of power through sensibility, Asymptotia is the theoretical figure for the active, endless labour of loosening that saturation from within. It refuses both transcendence and nihilism, replacing them with a fidelity to the act of unworking, a process where the gesture of dismantling is forever incomplete, forever approaching its object without ever achieving a final, purified state.

The Regulative Horizon

The logic of this endless process finds its first outline in Kant. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, reason's limit is figured as a horizon: "The sum total of all possible objects for our cognition seems to us to be a flat surface, which has its apparent horizon... It is impossible to attain this empirically, yet all questions of our pure reason pertain to that which might lie outside this horizon or at least on its borderline" (Kant, 1787: A760/B788). The horizon is not merely a boundary—it is the condition of an infinite task.

Reason, Kant writes, proceeds through regulative ideas—rules without objects. "The idea of reason will only prescribe a rule... in accordance with which it proceeds from the conditioned to the unconditioned, even though the latter will never be reached" (A510–511/B538–539). The unconditioned is a fiction that compels motion. For Asymptotia, this becomes the governing

principle: the self is the conditioned; the fiction of a purified disposition is the unreachable unconditioned. The process is the rule-bound movement between them. Kant's *progressus in indefinitum*—indefinite continuation—is thus the very form of this work: an approach that never arrives.

Thus, Asymptotia radicalises Kant. The regulative idea ceases to promise completion and becomes the form of an infinite task. The horizon sustains movement through perpetual non-arrival.

The Disaster

Where Kant's horizon sustains movement through a guiding fiction, Blanchot's disaster sustains it through the unworking of fiction itself. "There is no reaching the disaster... we are on the edge of disaster without being able to situate it in the future: it is always already past, and yet we are on the edge" (Blanchot, 1995: 1-2). The disaster, like the horizon, is unreachable; but it is not a goal. It is the name for the unworking that is already underway.

"The disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact" (1995: 1). This is the precise dynamic of the asymptotic process: to work upon the self in a way that ruins the coherence of its aesthetic disposition while leaving the self intact to continue. The disaster is a structure—"that which does not come, that which has put a stop to every arrival" (1995: 2). Yet this stopping compels endless motion. Blanchot's *pas*—"a step

over the edge... not ever once taken, but always taken, over again" (1995: xxv)—is the fundamental gesture of *Asymptotia*. The process is this step, forever taken and forever incomplete.

Where Kant located movement in the fiction of totality, Blanchot locates it in the impossibility of totality. The horizon persists as ruin, compelling a process that works precisely by unworking.

The Labour of Erosion

The disaster's motion finds its dynamic in Derrida's analysis of *usure*—wear, attrition, usury. "Metaphor seems to involve the usage of philosophical language in its entirety... *usure* constitutes the very history and structure of the philosophical metaphor" (Derrida, 1971: 209). *Usure* marks not passive deterioration but active, strategic consumption. Meaning persists by consuming itself.

This double movement defines the general economy of this process: "The word itself [*usure*] means both usury, the acquisition of too much interest, and using up, deterioration through usage... metaphysics's eternal attempt to profit from its ventures is based upon an irreducible loss" (1971: 209 n2). Each step in the refinement of one's disposition exacts a cost that prevents its closure. Progress occurs through strategic depletion.

Hence *plus de métaphore*—more metaphor, no more metaphor. “The field is never saturated” (1971: 219). The system of the self proliferates to preserve itself; exhaustion becomes its very method. Each attempt at arriving at a stable disposition only extends the chain of deferrals that guarantees non-arrival. Asymptotia therefore names not destruction but *usure*: endurance through loss, orientation through a willed erosion.

The Withdrawal of the Self

Where Derrida exposes the endless deferral within signification, Heidegger reveals the same rhythm as the very mode of Being. Truth, he writes, “is never merely the correct assertion of a statement, but unconcealment (*aletheia*). All revealing belongs within a harbouring and a concealing” (Heidegger, 1977: 25–26). Revealing is never pure revelation; it occurs only within and as concealment.

For the theory of unworking, this is foundational. The self cannot be fully revealed to itself. Every act of self-disclosure sustains the darkness it exposes. The self is thus asymptotic in its own being: it approaches itself through its own withdrawal. “The truth, the unconcealment, of Being, is, in the very instant of its revealing, caught up in concealing. Yet the revealing of the truth of Being is concealed as revealing” (1977: 43). Disclosure turns back upon itself.

The *Einblitz*—the flashing glance—is the figure for this process: a momentary illumination that does not dispel obscurity but is defined by it. To think unworking is to be called by this horizon of Being. “A destining of Being is never a blind fate... It is, rather, an opening way in which man is called upon to move to bring about that which is taking place” (1977: 34). The horizon calls to a movement, not to a rest.

Thus, the Heideggerian horizon transforms Kant’s regulative fiction and Blanchot’s disaster into an ontological condition: the self’s truth persists only as the untruth of its own showing.

Negativity as Unworking

Adorno’s philosophy provides the social and historical stakes for this ontological condition. His negativity is not a tool for transcendence but the very model of immanent unworking. “Artworks are compelled toward absolute negativity, yet it is precisely by virtue of this negativity that they are not absolutely negative. The constellation of the existing and nonexisting is the utopic figure of art” (Adorno, 1997:234). For Asymptotia, this describes the process of the self: a compulsion toward the negation of one’s own aesthetic disposition, which, precisely by never being complete, sustains a utopian glimmer.

This paradox defines the process’s autonomy as a mode of exposure. “Art is the social antithesis of society, not directly deducible from it” (Adorno, 1997:8). The self, in its unworking,

becomes a social antithesis. Its autonomy is a recursive form of immanence. "The unsolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form" (1997:6). So too, the unsolved antagonisms of the Aesthetic Burden return in the process of the self as immanent problems of its own reformation.

Negativity, in this sense, is the productive force of the process. As Adorno writes, "The power of identity is the power of nonidentity" (1997:xiii). Every identity of the self bears within itself the trace of its other. To think dialectically is to work on this contradiction without resolving it. Negativity thus names the structure of the process itself—the condition of co-existence between the self one is and the self one unworks.

This process begins from the collapse of transcendence. "It is only a step from the utopia of the self-likeness of artworks to the stink of the heavenly roses that art scatters here below... Absolute protest constrains it and carries over to its own *raison d'être*" (Adorno, 1997:234). Negativity folds back into the artwork's being; protest becomes immanent relation. For the self, this means that critique cannot transcend its own conditions because it is those conditions.

This practice refuses the "negation of the negation." Any attempt to redeem negativity into a new positivity betrays its critical potential. To believe one has finally unworked one's disposition is to fall into a new, false positivity. True negativity resists this by

remaining incomplete, unclosed, asymptotic. "Art puts the prohibition on positive negation to the test, showing that indeed negation of the negative is not the positive" (Adorno, 1997:233). The process's truth is not in its solutions but in its fractures.

"Only what does not fit in can be true" (Adorno, 1997:xx). Truth, for the self, is dissonance; it arises precisely where self-integration fails. This fidelity to failure is the process's ethical core. It is the refusal to reconcile with the Aesthetic Burden, even while recognising that the tools of refusal are already implicated in what they resist.

If Asymptotia names the unworking of disposition, then the question becomes how such unworking might occur in matter. To make is already to arrive, yet to refuse making is still to perform refusal as form. The studio thus inherits the asymptotic bind: every gesture toward materialisation both affirms and erodes itself. What follows is not the application of theory but its continuation through practice—the descent of Asymptotia into matter, where the work appears only as the non-arrival of its own making.

Materiality of Non-Arrival

The first studio brief of the semester opens with the claim that "*materials are active participants in how we understand, think about and negotiate the world we live in*" (Let's Think About Materiality, 2025). The premise is seductive: that matter, once

encountered, will reveal its agency to a curious and open subject. Yet this invitation conceals a pedagogical fantasy—the belief that the student can step beyond their own formation to meet materiality “outside their world.” Such phrasing presupposes the stability of a self capable of exiting its own aesthetic and social conditioning. Within the *Aesthetic Burden*, this autonomy is impossible: habitus determines not only what one values but what one can even perceive as available, resonant, or interesting.

The brief instructs the student to “*locate something that doesn’t come from your world*” and to “*feel curious about the material*.” This double imperative—estrangement coupled with curiosity—produces a moral economy of openness. Curiosity becomes an affective credential, the sanctioned mood through which discovery and learning are authenticated. Suspicion, refusal, or fatigue fall outside the affective register of legitimate engagement. The student is thus positioned not merely to work with matter but to perform curiosity as virtue.

This injunction mirrors what Lauren Berlant might call the affective pedagogy of neoliberal optimism: adaptability and enthusiasm recoded as ethical participation. The brief’s fifth rule—that the final work should “*reflect something about you and who you are*”—completes the circuit. The student must both leave themselves and return as legible subject, translating estrangement into self-knowledge. The assignment thereby

restages a familiar colonial-romantic logic: otherness is encountered only to restore the coherence of the self. Difference is not engaged but aestheticised; it becomes a mirror through which the institution recognises its pedagogical success.

The contradiction is structural. The subject is asked to step outside their formation while simultaneously rendering that formation visible and coherent. Expression and discovery, self and other, collapse into the same circuit of legibility. The “material” is never external—it is already coded within the field of recognition that determines what counts as material, as curiosity, as self.

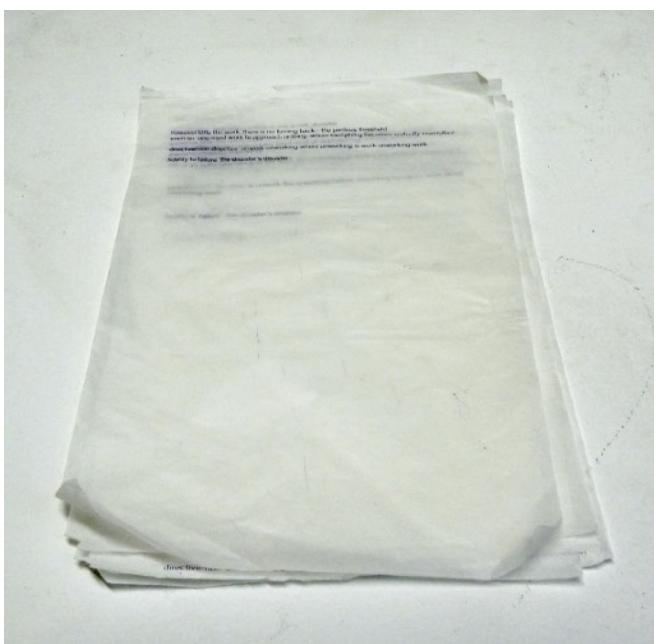
To engage such a framework critically, I propose nothing as material. Not as refusal or nihilism, but as a method that exposes the ontological limits the brief cannot articulate. *Nothing* is not absence but the space where the aesthetic burden becomes inoperative: where taste, recognition, and distinction fail to function as sorting mechanisms. Within this frame, nothing is the only material that truly lies “outside my world,” not because it is foreign, but because it cannot be assimilated by the grammars that constitute my world in the first place.

Working with nothing enacts the paradox the brief disavows. It meets the demand for curiosity through disorientation, and the demand for self-reflection through the exposure of self’s instability. Each attempt to materialise nothing—to fix it as substance or sign—betrays it, yet every refusal of form repeats

the aesthetic of refusal already legible within institutional taste. The resulting works—the agar experiments, the thermal poem, the wax sculptures—occupy this recursive bind. They appear only as unworkings: arrivals that register as the non-arrival of their own intention.

Nothing, then, becomes not an escape from the assignment but its completion by other means. It transforms the pedagogical script into a site of critical fidelity, where to follow the brief is to unwork it. The task of “material investigation” returns as an ontological question: what does it mean to engage materiality when even perception is structured by the institution’s moral and aesthetic order? To answer with nothing is to let that order speak through its own contradiction.

Thermal Poem Stack



This work consists of multiple iterative drafts of a short piece of writing, printed on slightly transparent thermal paper. The sheets are loosely stacked. Each layer partially reveals the one beneath, producing a blurred overlay of text underneath. The stack doesn't mark progress or resolution. It accumulates without clear arrival. No draft is final.

Writing offered a different kind of instability. Language can loop, contradict, undo itself. It allows for recursive breakdowns—through syntax and structure—without relying on overt gestures or visual drama. Printed on thermal paper, the text is slightly unstable and faint.

The poem doesn't resolve. It attempts at holding the paradoxes of Asymptotia open. Each draft is a variation—minor shifts in phrasing, emphasis, or structure—articulating the recursive unworking I am exploring.

The draft on top of the stack reads:

however little the work, there is no turning back—the perilous threshold. even so: one must work to approach nothing; where everything becomes mutually insensitive.

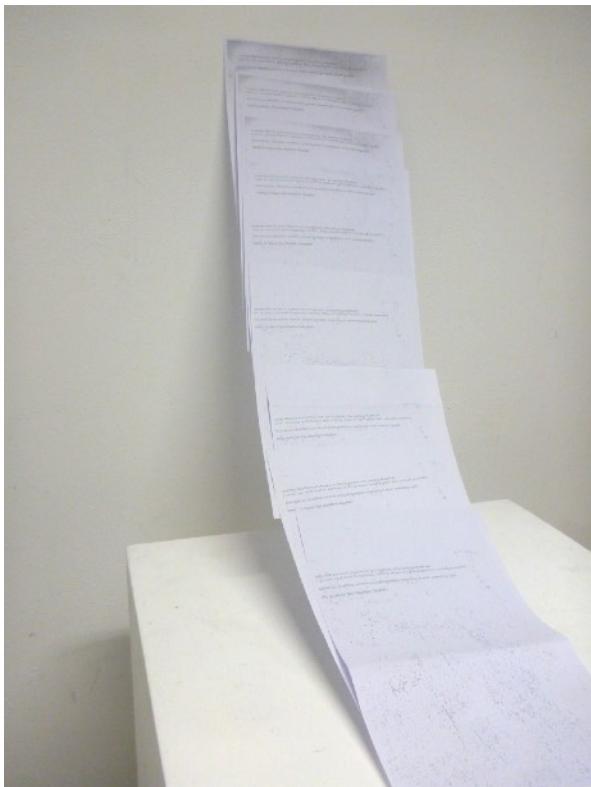
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directive/non-directive: unwork unworking where unworking is work unworking work.

fidelity to failure: disaster's disaster-

Asymptotic Copy

This work began as a photocopy of Thermal Poem Stack and extended through successive re-copying—each generation made from the previous one, using only the RMIT photocopier and standard institutional A4 paper. With each iteration, the text dissolved further: letters thinned into noise, stray pixels emerged, and tonal debris gathered where words once were. Eventually, the process plateaued. The degradation no longer intensified; it stabilised into a texture of residual marks—an asymptotic field where disintegration and persistence became indistinguishable.



This plateau embodies asymptotic unworking: an approach that never arrives. The copier's light translates presence into absence, each pass producing what Heidegger might call the simultaneity of revealing and concealing. The image does not vanish; it is continually reconstituted as trace. What appears as erasure is also inscription—each loss of legibility generating a new surface of attention. Derrida's usure becomes visible here as a visual process: meaning sustained through wearing away, presence defined by its own attrition.

The work's institutional materials—the photocopier, the white wall, the plinth, the copier paper—extend the critique of the Aesthetic Burden. Their supposed neutrality is itself an aesthetic ideology: the appearance of objectivity through homogeneity. To work entirely within these means is to inhabit the institution's grammar of order and let it erode itself through repetition. The copier thus becomes both instrument and metaphor for disciplinary reproduction: each image a document of compliance and unworking in the same stroke.

The project originated from a proposal by Antonia Sellbach, a respected artist and lecturer whose teaching and research have been invaluable to my practice. Her doctoral work, *Productive Limitation: A Painting Practice Exploring Semiotic and Linguistic Systems through Series and Translation* (RMIT University, 2020), examines how repetition and constraint generate meaning through translation. Sellbach's framework of productive

limitation—where structure produces rather than restricts possibility—informed both the conceptual and procedural logic of this work. While her suggestion to test the photocopier initiated the experiment, its development extended her ideas into an institutional register: the copier's repetition as erosion, its plateau as recursion, its pixelated trace as the material residue of aletheia. Each copy becomes both erasure and inscription—an asymptotic movement that never resolves, only endures.

Wax, wick



A candle is defined by what it may become—or more accurately, by what it may unbecome; its form is suspended in the promise of its own unworking.

In one object the wick is embedded and sealed: potential is present only as trace—arrival posited, withdrawn (after Derrida). Yet the potential of its unbecoming, its horizon of non-arrival, never itself arrives; the object therefore arrives as the non-arrival of its non-arrival.

In the other the wick runs perpendicular through the top: ignition is possible, but this ignition can only arrive as its own undoing. The flame that appears never becomes candle-flame; it arrives only as the negation of what arrival would be. Thus the object arrives as the arrival of non-arrival: appearance coinciding with failure, where what presents itself is identical only with its own impossibility.

Considered together, they do not oppose arrival to non-arrival but disclose their recursion: each emerges only through the other, each collapses into the other. The work turns on approach: the approach toward non-arrival, and the approach toward the arrival of non-arrival. To approach burning is to approach failure; to approach refusal is still to make refusal appear. Each object therefore enacts an unworking of candle-function that prevents such functionality and asymptotically heads toward unworking; and in doing so, it simultaneously unworks unworking (after Blanchot's *désœuvrement*). If the sealed wick remains unlit, non-arrival arrives as trace. If the perpendicular wick is lit, arrival arrives only as its failure to

become candle-flame. If ignition is prohibited, prohibition merely overlays a structural foreclosure already in the form.

What is disclosed is not negation but recursion: every pursuit of arrival folds into non-arrival; every preservation of non-arrival still arrives as trace or event. Arrival and non-arrival are not separable states but blurred modalities of the same structure. The candles hold to this bind as method—fidelity to failure—where function is constituted as recursive unworking, and the horizon can only be approached as its own undoing.

But this recursive bind is doubled: the objects arrive as artworks of non-arrival, staging the paradox of being recognised as “works” precisely through their refusal to work. They materialise the meta-gesture of non-arrival arriving—only as the non-arrival of non-arrival. And in this they resemble the broader fate of art itself: no work can escape the impossibility of originality, since every negation, refusal, or unworking is immediately legible within an already coded history (minimalism, conceptual art, postmodernism). Each attempt to evade capture folds into another recurrence of capture. The candle-objects are therefore not exceptions but exemplars: they disclose art’s recursive condition, where originality survives only as repetition, and where disappearance arrives only as another form of appearance.

Otherwise Than Asymptotia

To remain within non-arrival is to dwell in fidelity without ground. Yet the horizon of unworking, sustained too faithfully, risks curving back into enclosure. The recursive awareness that defined *Asymptotia*—its refusal to stabilise, its endless unworking of capture—can harden into its own law. At this point, orientation itself becomes a kind of inertia: the ethics of non-arrival folds into repetition, and fidelity begins to resemble paralysis.

To move otherwise requires neither abandoning the horizon nor seeking its opposite, but letting it turn—to *reorient* the unworking toward relation, toward the world that continues despite theory's suspension. The following movement, then, does not depart from *Asymptotia* but proceeds from its exhaustion. It asks how the gesture of unworking might remain responsive—to matter, to ecology, to the urgencies of the present—without collapsing into the optimism of newness or the fatalism of capture.

Environmental Ethics, Vibrant Materialism, Co-Authorship

After the saturation of critique and the tightening of self-reflection, a different orientation emerges: one grounded in relation rather than resistance. *Asymptotia* sought to loosen aesthetic hierarchies and disarm the coercions of capital, but its conceptual precision risked isolation. To proceed, practice must meet the world not as abstraction but as a shared condition—ecological, material, and ethical.

Adorno warned that “what men want to learn from nature is how to use it in order wholly to dominate it and other men. That is the only aim” (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944:2). Against this instrumental logic, Jane Bennett proposes an affirmative counter-imaginary: “The figure of an intrinsically vital materiality can help us to experience the relationship between persons and other materialities more horizontally, more in the vein of comembership, of companionship” (Bennett 2010:112). Between these poles—domination and companionship—art finds a precarious path: not mastery, not reverence, but attention.

Yet the optimism of “vital materiality” remains bound to perception. However generously we ascribe vitality to matter, we encounter it through the limits of our own sensorium. As Timothy Morton observes, “We never see the environment directly; we only ever see the idea of it” (Morton 2007:19). The dream of a flat ontology can still recenter the human observer, flattering our capacity to acknowledge what exceeds us.

A more demanding ethic begins with that recognition. It accepts that the relation between artist and material is never equal but always reciprocal in exposure. The material answers back—through decay, contamination, transformation—and in doing so unsettles intention. Donna Haraway writes, “Responsibility is not a position of control but a relationship of response-ability” (Haraway 2016:28). To work responsibly, then, is not to master

but to stay responsive: to treat process as conversation rather than command.

From this stance, materiality becomes temporal rather than inert. Wax melts, agar curls, paper yellows; each process inscribes duration into form. Meaning arises through these changes, not despite them. Practice becomes a kind of co-authorship in which matter and maker continually revise one another. As Haraway reminds us, "We become—with each other or not at all" (Haraway 2016:4).

To think and make in this way is to accept fragility as an ethical ground. Art is not the assertion of mastery but the trace of contact—an act of staying with what resists possession. The work no longer seeks to perfect its boundaries; it listens to what seeps through them.

Other Deviations

If *Asymptotia* tends toward enclosure, it is not because the thought itself demands it, but because fidelity always risks hardening into form. What appears as tautology is often the trace of devotion — the repetition necessary to remain near what resists articulation. Yet within this pressure, other tones emerge: minor inflections that neither oppose nor resolve the bind but move differently within it.

Play names one such inflection. It loosens the tension without breaking it, allowing gestures to wander without the burden of exemplifying theory. In play, orientation becomes movement without telos — a suspension rather than a strategy. It opens the possibility that not every act must signify resistance; some may simply drift, hesitate, or misfire, carrying their meaning in delay.

Idiosyncrasy is another. It is not the assertion of individuality but the persistence of formation — the uneven residue of habitus (Bourdieu 1977:78). What appears singular may in fact be the social seen from its edges: the moment where structure shows its seams. Idiosyncrasy interrupts legibility, not through refusal but through excess, through the faint misalignment that discloses the subject's conditioning without fully repeating it.

The erotic moves still closer. It reintroduces touch where distance has prevailed — the tremor between attention and surrender. Barthes called this the *grain*, "the materiality of the body speaking its own language" (Barthes 1977:188). Within this grain, critique softens into sensation; theory encounters its own temperature. The erotic does not oppose unworking but thickens it, giving it texture and risk.

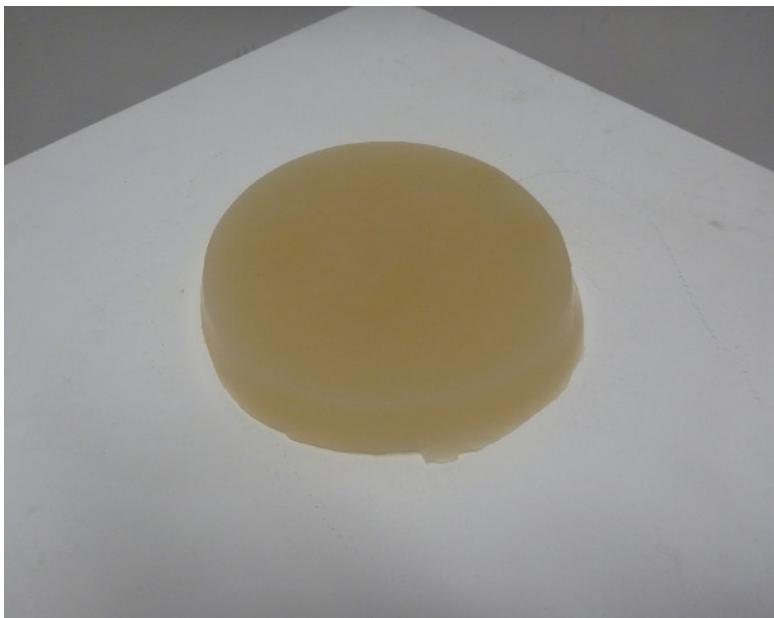
These gestures—play, idiosyncrasy, erotics—do not provide relief from *Asymptotia* but operate as minor variations within it. They do not replace its discipline with affirmation; they mark the moments when discipline falters, when the work breathes

unevenly. To move otherwise is not to escape recursion but to register its rhythms, to let the horizon shimmer rather than seal.

Agar as Asymptotic Bio-Material

Agar emerged as both experiment and orientation—a material whose behaviour continually unsettled my assumptions about control, legibility, and duration. Plant-based, translucent, and temporally unstable, agar insists on its own perishability. Within days of pouring, the sheets began to curl, shrink, crack, and discolour; fragments detached, colonies formed, and the surface gradually disintegrated. What remained was not an object but a process—an unfolding that refused to stabilise. The first trial lasted scarcely two days before collapse. This collapse did not mark failure but disclosure: temporality itself appeared as the material.

This volatility foregrounded what Adorno might call the “truth of transience,” the way form attests to its own impermanence (Adorno 1970:132). Agar’s resistance to fixity transforms fragility into a structural principle. It refuses the permanence through which commodification and canonisation usually secure value. Each iteration undermines its own conditions of preservation, refusing to arrive as finished artwork. The medium thus aligns with the horizon of Asymptotia: it moves toward disappearance but never fully vanishes, persisting as residue, film, or odour. Non-arrival becomes not disappearance but survival in altered form.



The material's instability also reconfigures authorship. Jane Bennett describes "thing-power" as the capacity of nonhuman matter to "act as quasi-agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (Bennett 2010:8). Agar embodies this agency with quiet insistence. Mould, humidity, and temperature intervene as co-authors, producing outcomes that exceed intention. What unfolds is not collaboration in the sentimental sense but a redistribution of agency: a practice of shared contingency rather than mastery. Heidegger's claim that "man is not the lord of beings... but the shepherd of Being" (Heidegger 1949:245) resonates here—not as humility but as attunement to a field one cannot command.

Yet the experiment also revealed the limits of this attunement. When shown to peers, the agar sheet drew little response—its faint translucency fell below aesthetic expectation. This indifference became instructive. The work's near-invisibility, its quiet decay, functioned as a minor form of non-arrival: not the spectacle of destruction but the unremarkable passing of attention. In this, the material performed what Adorno termed *Nichtidentisches*—the non-identical that resists full conceptual capture (Adorno 1970:5). Its force lay not in affective immediacy but in the way it slipped through recognition altogether.

Still, such gestures risk absorption into an existing aesthetic lineage. Since the 1960s, the rhetoric of process and entropy—from Eva Hesse's latex to Robert Morris's felt—has been canonised, its anti-form gestures re-stabilised as style. Agar's fragility can easily be read within this lineage, its decay reinterpreted as another iteration of dematerialisation. What once unsettled now circulates as precedent. This awareness folds back into the work itself: even the act of decay becomes legible as art history's continuity. The material's refusal cannot escape the grammar that renders refusal visible.

Agar, then, does not transcend capture—it discloses its texture. It moves between matter and discourse, life and language, oscillating in an asymptotic drift. Each sheet approaches disappearance without coinciding with it; each residue remains, faint but insistent, as remainder. In this way, agar becomes less

a medium than a mode of thought—an enactment of unworking in material form. It is the trace of what cannot hold, and the holding of that trace.



Colony and Contamination

If agar stages the asymptotic condition—neither arriving nor disappearing—it also discloses another horizon: contamination. The bacterial and fungal colonies that bloom across its surface are not neutral participants in an ecological co-authorship. They mark the persistence of structural power as material event—the aesthetic burden manifesting biologically. Contamination is not only biological but epistemic: the visible form of history's residue.

Jane Bennett writes that “*the figure of an intrinsically vital materiality can help us to experience the relationship between persons and other materialities more horizontally, more in the vein of comembership*” (Bennett 2010:112). Yet even this imagined horizontality is mediated through human frames of recognition. The vitality of matter is never simply encountered; it is always already *disciplined* through institutional, linguistic, and historical apparatuses. The agar’s “life” unfolds within the controlled conditions of an art school laboratory—humidity, sterilisation, storage—each calibrated by human protocols of safety and order. What appears as spontaneous emergence is already determined by these parameters of care and control. Co-membership, here, is inseparable from governance.



This contamination exposes the underside of Bennett's optimism. The mould does not merely collaborate—it *occupies*. Each bacterial colony registers the environment's micro-histories: dust, spores, residues of industrial air. Their proliferation enacts what Achille Mbembe calls "*the materiality of power*"—a presence that "permeates bodies and spaces, reproducing domination through exposure rather than repression" (Mbembe 2001:24). The agar plate becomes a diagram of this condition: a site where power circulates not through coercion but through contact, where the institution's invisible atmosphere literally reproduces itself on the material's surface.

Even within this microscopic scene, the logic of the colony persists. The language of microbial "colonies" carries the ghost of empire, repeating in scientific and aesthetic discourse what it once named politically: expansion, settlement, extraction. The contamination of the agar is thus a material allegory for the contamination of thought—how even gestures of unworking remain written within colonial grammars of capture. As Bourdieu notes, "*every field produces its own forms of symbolic violence*" (Bourdieu 1993:40). The agar's slow decay performs this violence materially: its very capacity to host life is conditioned by the institution that defines its visibility as "experiment."

Within this frame, contamination becomes both process and critique. It shows how no co-authorship is innocent, no material

encounter free of mediation. The agar's fragility and decay—its refusal of stable form—do not simply echo *Asymptotia*'s horizon of non-arrival; they extend it into the register of ecology and institution. The work's decomposition becomes a structural reading of its context: the biological unworking of the same forces that discipline the artist, the studio, and the field itself.

The colonies that bloom are not only life but inscription—traces of systems that cannot be purified away. Their presence unsettles the fantasy of autonomy that underwrites both artistic and ecological ethics. The agar cannot be separated from its conditions of contamination, just as no practice can be cleanly extracted from its institutional and historical surround. In this sense, the work's collapse is its truth: an unworking not only of form but of purity itself. The colony names the persistence of history within matter—the afterlife of empire as aesthetic growth.

Humour, Play, and the Abject

The agar's decay provoked playfulness—jokes about lighting it like a birthday cake or eating it. What I framed as endurance and unworking appeared to others as absurd, even comic. This response revealed what Kristeva calls the "fascination with the corpse" at the heart of the abject (1982:4): disgust folding into amusement. The work's seriousness dissolved into play, exposing the contingency of its own gravity.

Humour here was not dismissal but disclosure. It loosened Asymptotia's austerity, turning endurance into rhythm. Bataille's reminder that "laughter is sovereign" (1986:20) resonates: it collapses hierarchy, unsettling critique's authority. Decay became performance—matter and audience co-producing meaning through absurdity.



Otherwise than Seriousness

This reception redirected the work's ethic. Rather than fidelity to solemn unworking, the piece invited a lighter asymptotic mode—failure shared, not endured. The humour opened an otherwise than Asymptotia: not escape from recursion but its breathing space. The agar's collapse thus completes a turn from endurance to responsiveness, from critique to relation. Decay,

humour, and fragility converge as a single gesture: the world unworking.

Asymptotic Ontogenesis

If Asymptotia first appeared as a horizon of endurance—thought persisting without arrival—then its ontological counterpart emerges in what Audronė Žukauskaitė calls an *organism-oriented ontology*. Here, the organism is not an object or category but a field of relation, an ever-unfolding topology of differentiation. Žukauskaitė writes:

“生命不是一个已经完成的实体，而是一种持续的生成过程——一个在形态、功能和关系中不断重新定义自己的场域。”

“Life is not a finished entity but a continuous process of becoming—a field that constantly redefines itself through form, function, and relation.”

(Žukauskaitė, Organism-Oriented Ontology 2024: 37)

This move from substance to process inverts ontology's traditional task. Being no longer guarantees stability; it is instead the ongoing negotiation of instability. In the asymptotic sense, existence endures not *in spite* of incompleteness but *throughit*. What Žukauskaitė calls a “continuous process of becoming” parallels Asymptotia's refusal of arrival—the persistence of life as recursive differentiation.

Simondon's influence is explicit in Žukauskaitė's reading. "西蒙东所说的'准稳态'揭示了存在的关系本质：任何存在都是在不断调节的张力中维持自身的开放系统" ("Simondon's notion of the 'metastable' reveals the relational nature of existence: every being sustains itself as an open system through continuous modulation of tensions") (Žukauskaitė, 2024: 45). The metastable replaces the stable as ontology's ground: the organism persists by never reaching equilibrium. This is Asymptotia's ontological analogue—the condition of being that must remain unresolved in order to exist.

The agar experiments revealed this principle materially. Each sheet held itself together only through its slow collapse; each colony sustained the work by destabilising it. Žukauskaite's notion of individuation extends this:

"个体化不是从混沌到秩序的线性过渡，而是一种相互依存的生成，生命在个体与环境的互渗中不断被发明。"

"Individuation is not a linear transition from chaos to order, but a co-dependent becoming, in which life is continually invented through the mutual immanence of organism and milieu."

(Žukauskaitė, 2024: 49)

To exist, then, is not to affirm self-sufficiency but to participate in reciprocal invention. The agar's decomposition enacted this ontogenesis as relation: humidity, air, mould, and cellulose co-authored the work's becoming. Within this asymptotic field,

autonomy becomes a fantasy; what appears as form is already the residue of countless interpenetrations.

Such an ontology necessarily transforms ethics. Žukauskaitė insists that “存在即共在 (being-with)；每一个生成都意味着责任，因为生成总是与他者的生成纠缠在一起” (“*To exist is to co-exist; every becoming implies responsibility, for becoming is always entangled with the becoming of others*”) (Žukauskaitė, 2024: 83). Responsibility here is not moral burden but structural condition: to be is already to affect and to be affected.

Asymptotia thus becomes ethical by default—its endurance depends on responsiveness.

“有机体与非有机体之间并不存在本体论的等级差异，它们都参与同一个生成的力场。”

“There is no ontological hierarchy between the organic and the inorganic; both participate in the same field of becoming.”
(Žukauskaitė, 2024: 91)

This ontological equality affirms what the agar made visible: matter as co-agent, not medium. Each bacterial bloom was not contamination but participation, a visible instance of Being's mutual immanence. The work's so-called failure—its decomposition—thus appeared as a success of relation, an instance of what Žukauskaitė calls “同一个生成的力场,” the same generative field.

Finally, Žukauskaitė radicalises the temporality implicit in this ontology:

“时间不是外在的度量，而是生命自身的延展：生成的每一刻都同时包含了未完成和逝去。”

“Time is not an external measure but life's own extension: each moment of becoming simultaneously contains the unfinished and the bygone.”

(Žukauskaitė, 2024: 101)

Here, temporality ceases to be progression; it becomes immanent duration. The “unfinished and bygone” coincide—an exact articulation of *Asymptotia*'s temporality. What endures does so by including its own disappearance.

Thus, *Asymptotic Ontogenesis* designates the ontological substrate of *Asymptotia*'s ethics: being as metastable relation, time as unfinishable differentiation, matter as co-agent, and responsibility as the rhythm of coexistence. Existence persists not by overcoming decay but by composing with it. Ontology becomes endurance through unworking—an organismic field of becoming without arrival, where each form is the persistence of relation itself.

Closing Notes

This theory emerged from within the conditions the *Aesthetic Burden* describes. Writing *Asymptotia* has made clear that

unworking cannot be separated from the structures that enable it. The institution is not outside the problem; it is part of its texture.

To think unworking here is to recognise the limits of critique as a position. The same systems that make critical reflection possible also absorb it. What remains is to stay alert to that proximity—to work within it without mistaking it for distance.

Chapter 3

Virtue

The aesthetic order of empire persists not in ornament or myth, but in the bureaucratic idioms of care, inclusion, and innovation—the infrastructures that translate domination into virtue. What once organised conquest now organises coherence. The museum, the university, and the biennale, once imagined as refuges from power, function as its affective interface. Empire's grammar has shifted from representation to administration; its aesthetic form is procedure. What formerly ruled through spectacle now governs through sentiment. The bureaucracies of virtue—the ethics committees, partnerships, and impact frameworks—compose the contemporary architecture of consent. Their function is not to mask violence but to make it feel moral.

Where *The Aesthetic Burden* named the institutional aesthetic of virtue, the present analysis confronts its worldly operation: how moral infrastructure has become the operational logic of empire. The languages of sustainability, participation, and progress now perform the work that colonial ornament once did—they make domination look good. Virtue has replaced beauty as the legitimating form of power. The institution no longer celebrates domination through splendour; it performs benevolence through ethics. Every progressive partnership, every inclusive initiative, every “future-facing” design studio extends the same promise: that violence can be redeemed through good intentions. Aesthetic virtue has become imperial method.

Petrossiants reminds us that the autonomy of art has always depended on surplus. "Historically, Euro-US philosophers of aesthetics argued that artistic work is 'autonomous' from labor ... because it is dependent on financial surplus and not on labor. This helped justify nationalist expansion and colonial looting to fill the coffers of the state and its elites" (Petrossiants in Petrossiants & Rosales 2025: 18). Autonomy thus emerges not as freedom from power but as the ideological refinement of its wealth. Today, the same logic persists: "Neoliberal art institutions ... profess being 'neutral' with regards to geopolitical violence and capitalist exploitation—a euphemism for profiting from culture while reproducing the systems of expansion and violence that are often being critiqued in the work they exhibit" (2025: 18–19). Autonomy becomes alibi; negation becomes branding. The aesthetic field reproduces the violence it claims to expose.

Rancière anticipates this collapse of critique into administration: "The arts only ever lend to projects of domination or emancipation what they have in common with them: bodily positions and movements, functions of speech, the parcelling out of the visible and the invisible" (2004: 24). What was once the promise of emancipation now performs the gestures of governance. Autonomy and complicity are not opposites but twin effects of the same regime. The institution's claim to freedom conceals its function as moral infrastructure.

Neoliberalism no longer names an economic system but an aesthetic regime—the conversion of progressive feeling into governance. It rules not through austerity but through empathy, not through censorship but through participation. The university that pledges equity while its vice-chancellor earns over a million dollars, its research partners supply weapons, and its design students are mobilised into the soft rhetoric of “regenerative futures,” is not an aberration but an exemplar. Its contradictions are its coherence. Its moral language *is* its mode of domination. The violence of neoliberalism lies not in hypocrisy but in sincerity. The institution believes what it says.

This is not Thatcherism in new clothes. It is something worse: the absorption of the Left’s moral vocabulary into capital’s administrative lexicon. Diversity, creativity, sustainability, care—these are no longer oppositional values but the dominant idioms of extraction. They are the moral technologies through which empire maintains its human face. Wendy Brown writes that “neoliberalism is a moral-political project that aims to protect traditional hierarchies by negating the very idea of the social and radically restricting the reach of democratic political power” (2019: 13). What appears as care or collaboration is not the expansion of democracy but the erasure of the social itself. Institutions aestheticise morality to obscure material violence; ethics replaces politics as the medium of control.

Brown's insight extends beyond the Right she critiques. "Assaults on constitutional democracy, on racial, gender, and sexual equality," she notes, "have all been carried out in the name of both freedom and morality" (2019: 7). The neoliberal university and museum, with their glossy ethics statements and equity plans, perform the same manoeuvre: domination in the name of virtue. Their inclusivity is the aesthetic form of exclusion, their sustainability the public relations of extractivism. Freedom, collaboration, and openness are the moral alibis of empire. They replace hierarchy with participation, coercion with care, exploitation with opportunity—but the structure remains unchanged. In this order, what is administered as empathy is experienced as ethics.

Benjamin foresaw the structure, if not the tone, of this moralisation. "Fascism attempts to organize the masses without changing property relations," he wrote; "its logical result is the introduction of aesthetics into political life" (1935: 122). The twenty-first century offers a cruel inversion: neoliberalism does not aestheticise politics, it moralises aesthetics. The result is identical—domination made beautiful—but the material has changed. What fascism staged through spectacle, neoliberalism administers through virtue. The language of care, sustainability, and inclusion performs the same function fascist beauty once did: it aestheticises power by making it feel humane. Expression replaces transformation; empathy replaces redistribution. The aesthetic of virtue is the moral face of empire.

If fascism declared war beautiful because it revealed humanity's dominion over machinery, neoliberal empire declares care beautiful because it displays humanity's dominion over crisis. The museum's "repairing futures" initiative and the weapons company's "protecting tomorrow" campaign share the same faith in repair as control. The moral sublime of our age is not conquest but care. "Neoliberalism," Brown writes, "converts inequality and domination into moral order and freedom" (2019: 13). The progressive aesthetic of repair thus becomes a moral anesthetic: a bureaucratic balm that erases the structural violence it was designed to heal.

Thatcher's infamous claim that "there is no such thing as society" becomes, under neoliberal culture, the silent premise of every institutional gesture of virtue. As Brown paraphrases: "If there is no such thing as society, then there is no such thing as social power generating hierarchies, exclusion, and violence" (2019: 40). In this vacuum, moral affect replaces structural analysis. Diversity becomes a matter of individual virtue rather than collective redistribution. The social disappears behind the ethical. The art world exemplifies this logic: participation without politics, representation without redistribution, empathy without equality. Neoliberal virtue offers the pleasure of moral identification in place of transformation. It allows the privileged to experience themselves as good while preserving the conditions that produce suffering.

Benjamin's "mass ornament" returns as the inclusive infrastructure of empire. Where fascism gave the masses the aesthetic pleasure of their own subjugation, neoliberalism offers the administrative satisfaction of their moralisation. Biennales, partnerships, and ESG platforms translate inequality into virtue, converting domination into empathy at the level of form. Humanity now experiences its own exploitation as moral satisfaction. The violence of empire is not denied; it is aestheticised as compassion.

Benjamin lamented the decay of the artwork's aura under mechanical reproduction. Yet neoliberal culture has engineered a new aura—not of authenticity, but of ethical sincerity. Each press release, mural, and partnership radiates moral aura: the warm glow of virtue concealing the machinery of extraction. This is how violence appears as care, hierarchy as progress, domination as opportunity. The aura of virtue re-enchants capital, offering transcendence through ethics where transformation is impossible.

Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* supplies the grammar of this transformation. "The spectacle presents itself as a vast inaccessible reality that can never be questioned. Its sole message is: 'What appears is good; what is good appears'" (1967: §12). Virtue is the spectacle's latest idiom. Neoliberal virtue—sustainability, diversity, "ethical futures"—is the spectacle's monologue of self-legitimation. The press release

becomes sermon; the partnership, confession. What Debord called "the ruling order's monologue of self-praise" (1967: §24) now speaks in the moral tones of inclusion and care. The spectacle no longer glorifies domination directly; it aestheticises its mitigation. It sells virtue as the highest form of commodity. The moral economy of visibility replaces the political economy of production. The institution thrives on its own exposure, aestheticising critique as proof of conscience.

"The spectacle keeps people in a state of unconsciousness," Debord writes; "it may gild poverty, but it cannot transcend it" (1967: §44). The moral spectacle gilds violence, transforming complicity into compassion and extraction into empathy. The more virtuous the language, the more invisible the hierarchy. The neoliberal institution's endless discourse of ethics is not the supplement to its violence but its form. Its virtue is its cruelty.

Within this regime, critique itself becomes administration. Rakowitz observes how institutions compel endless repetition of testimony under the banner of diversity: "People have to tell the same stories over and over and over again ... but the institutions don't listen. ... Writing and statements about oppression have become so appropriated by the system that this kind of writing that did have an urgency has subsequently become anesthetized" (in Petrossiants & Rosales 2022: 8). Empathy becomes procedure; listening, labour. What once served as dissent now functions as maintenance. Virtue and value

converge in infrastructure, as Vishmidt notes—the curatorial languages that once promised care now operate as technologies of legitimacy. Art, policy, and philanthropy produce atmospheres of moral feeling that absorb critique into administration.

Rakowitz recalls how the city's repurposing of Mierle Ukeles's *Maintenance Art* transformed refusal into décor: "positions that serve to artwash over the administration's violence and economic borderline austerity" (in Petrossiants & Rosales 2022: 9). Care becomes camouflage; repair, public relations.

Even dissent now circulates as proof of openness—until it becomes structural. The institution welcomes critique only insofar as it reaffirms its reflexivity. Transparency has become the dominant aesthetic of legitimacy. The museum thrives on its own exposure; every denunciation becomes a badge of virtue. But this tolerance collapses when critique threatens the infrastructure of profit. Rakowitz recounts how, during *Theater of Operations* at MoMA PS1, his attempt to suspend a work in protest of the museum's military entanglements was rejected three times. "What that experience at PS1 showed me was that even institutional critique is no longer tolerated ... They rejected my proposals three times to put up the statement and pause the work. ... It's so fucking insulting" (in Petrossiants & Rosales 2022: 14). The performance of openness reveals its limit: dissent is admissible only when it can be managed—when it remains legible as virtue. As Petrossiants writes, "The museum ... can nominalize what is and what is not art, and also what is and is

not protest, or critique. But what they cannot nominalize is struggle" (in Petrossiants & Rosales 2022: 14). Struggle is what exceeds administration; it is the remainder that refuses moralisation.

Debord's diagnosis returns with full force: "The spectacle is the visible negation of life—a negation that has taken on a visible form" (1967: §10). Institutional critique has become that visibility, the spectacular self-negation through which power maintains itself. Exposure no longer threatens; it sustains. The aesthetics of virtue remain intact precisely because they can accommodate their own denunciation. What once named contradiction has become continuity. Critique has been aestheticised into labour.

If critique now functions as labour, resistance must begin as refusal of form itself—an unworking of the grammar of virtue. Rakowitz gestures toward this necessity: "The work needs to be something that can't be sold ... to find its way into spaces that don't need patrons to launder their reputations" (in Petrossiants & Rosales 2022: 8). Groys reframes this impulse through negativity: "Modern and contemporary art wants to make things not better but worse ... to make dysfunctional things out of functional things, to betray expectations, to reveal the invisible presence of death where we tend to see only life" (2014: 11). To resist is not to perform opposition within the moral circuits of virtue but to make the system stutter—to disturb its coherence,

to refuse its completion. Unworking names this refusal: the act through which critique ceases to mirror and begins to interrupt.

Debord understood this as art's terminal gesture: "Art in its period of dissolution ... is at once an art of change and the purest expression of the impossibility of change ... Its vanguard is its own disappearance" (1967: §190). Resistance, like unworking, does not seek redemption. It enacts collapse as fidelity to what remains ungoverned. It affirms struggle where virtue demands reconciliation. The task is not to imagine a purer ethics but to dismantle the moral form itself—to unmake the aesthetic of care that sustains empire's self-image.

At the level of the city, this logic becomes visible as policy. Petrossiants describes artwashing as "the material, visible, street-level way that art is used to wash images and processes of displacement and violence ... Build a park, make it nice, then kick everyone out" (in Petrossiants & Rosales 2022: 17).

Rodriguez extends the point: "The museum starts to perform the functions of displacement and development. And it's been in that role since the neoliberal turn" (in Petrossiants & Rosales 2022: 17). Groys situates this within total aestheticisation: "We are living in a time of total aestheticization ... Using the lessons of modern and contemporary art, we are able to totally aestheticize the world—to see it as being already a corpse—without being necessarily situated at the end of history" (2014: 12).

Aestheticisation thus becomes empire's self-portrait: the transformation of every site of violence into a site of display.

Debord foresaw this decades earlier: "As culture becomes completely commodified it tends to become the star commodity of spectacular society ... to justify an unjustifiable society and to establish a general science of false consciousness" (1967: §§193–194). Culture's autonomy becomes empire's most sophisticated product. The spectacle does not conceal violence; it curates it. In our time, destruction is no longer aestheticised as beauty or technological sublimity but as virtue itself. The neoliberal spectacle converts violence into moral surface—wars of "democracy promotion," extractive technologies of "sustainability," exploitative labour recast as "empowerment." Virtue is the final stage of the spectacle: goodness weaponised as appearance.

Here, political discourse collapses into a theatre of moral disagreement. To conservatives and centrists, the problem appears as "woke capitalism"—the excesses of progressivism invading the market. To sections of the Left, the same phenomena appear as moral progress, however compromised: a sign that capital can be persuaded toward justice. Both positions mistake symptom for structure. Each accepts the moralisation of capital as its natural form, differing only on whether the result should be celebrated or restrained. The right condemns the spectacle of virtue for corrupting the market's neutrality; the left

defends it as evidence of reform. In truth, both sustain the same order: a system that aestheticises ethics and markets empathy as governance.

If autonomy, care, and critique have all been aestheticised into governance, the question becomes what practice might exceed administration without retreating into purity. Debord's final proposition offers the orientation: "The real values of culture can be maintained only by actually negating culture. But this negation can no longer be a cultural negation. It may in a sense take place within culture, but it points beyond it" (1967: §210). To resist is to unwork the moral architecture of empire—not to seek innocence within it, but to act against its grammar of virtue. Struggle begins where virtue ends: in the collective refusal to aestheticise our own complicity.

What this unworking exposes is not theoretical—it is infrastructural. The moral language of inclusion and care is inseparable from the machinery of annihilation it conceals. The same institutions that speak of empathy, sustainability, and progress are embedded in the supply chains of destruction. The aesthetic of virtue is not peripheral to violence; it is its enabling condition. Beneath the banners of "innovation" and "partnership," the logistical order of empire continues uninterrupted, converting atrocity into opportunity.

Despite a nominal ceasefire announced in October 2025, the material conditions of genocide persist. The infrastructure of

destruction—aircraft, bombs, missiles, and ammunition—remains in recent use and continuous replenishment. Major arms corporations—Lockheed Martin, Boeing, BAE Systems, Thales, and Rheinmetall—continue to supply and profit from the weapons used in Israel's assault on Palestinian civilians. Their own public statements, along with independent investigations, leave little ambiguity about their role in enabling the annihilation of Gaza.

Lockheed Martin, described as "the world's largest weapons manufacturer" (American Friends Service Committee 2024), produces the F-16 and F-35 fighter jets that have become "the workhorses of the bombing campaign in Gaza" (Anadolu Agency 2025). Its AGM-114 Hellfire missiles, fired from Apache helicopters, "have been widely used in Gaza since 2023 and are among the primary weapons in the campaign" (Anadolu Agency 2025). The company's CEO has publicly "highlighted the Israel and Ukraine conflicts as potential drivers for increased revenue in the coming years" (AFSC 2024), exposing the economic calculus underpinning its participation in warfare. Lockheed's Israel division declares pride in "the significant role it has fulfilled in the security of the State of Israel," reporting "industrial participation agreements with Israeli defence companies ... expected to exceed \$6 billion" (Lockheed Martin Israel 2025).

Boeing's weapons have been equally central to Israel's aerial bombardment. Its GBU-39 small-diameter bomb "has been

dropped widely on Gaza" (Anadolu Agency 2025), and "after Israel received an expedited shipment of 1,000 Boeing-made GBU-39s, the administration approved the transfer of more than 1,000 more" (Responsible Statecraft 2024). Investigations confirmed that "the bombs Israel used in Sunday's strike near Rafah ... were GBU-39s, a small US-manufactured munition" (The Times of Israel 2024). The May 2024 Rafah massacre, in which 45 civilians were killed, was directly linked to these Boeing-produced munitions (CNN 2024).

BAE Systems "manufactures the M109 howitzer ... firing thousands of shells into Gaza during the war" (Anadolu Agency 2025). The same 155 mm mobile artillery system has been used "extensively ... firing tens of thousands of 155 mm shells into the Gaza Strip," including "white phosphorus bombs, the use of which is forbidden in densely populated civilian areas and potentially amounts to a war crime" (AFSC 2024). Germany's Rheinmetall "supplies Israel with 120 mm precision tank ammunition ... used in the ground assault on Gaza" (Anadolu Agency 2025) and has "agreed to fulfil a request by Israel ... for 10,000 rounds of 120 mm tank ammunition" (Forensic Architecture 2024). Human Rights Watch likewise reported that Israel's use of white phosphorus "puts civilians at risk of serious and long-term injuries" (HRW 2023).

Thales has also been directly implicated. Between 2018 and 2023 it "sold electronic components and communication

systems for Israeli drones for €2 million ... used against Palestinian civilians" (Disclose 2024). Amnesty International Australia confirmed that Australian-manufactured components are being legally exported to the U.S. and re-routed to Israel "to be used in their genocide against Palestinians in Gaza" (Amnesty International Australia 2025). Research found that Thales was "supplying 155 mm artillery ammunition shells and completed M795 155 mm projectiles to Israel, via an approved export permit to the United States" (Amnesty International Australia 2025).

The evidence establishes a sustained material chain linking these corporations to acts of genocide. Boeing's GBU-39 bombs, BAE's M109 artillery, Lockheed's F-35s and Hellfire missiles, Rheinmetall's tank rounds, and Thales' drone components form an interlocking infrastructure of mass death. A ceasefire does not erase this complicity; it merely pauses the visible phase of violence while the machinery that enables it remains intact and profitable.

The facilitation of Israel's assault on Gaza by arms-manufacturing corporations and their partner institutions is not only an ethical failure but a breach of international law. Under the *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* (1948), states and corporations that supply arms or materials used in genocidal acts risk liability for complicity. Findings from the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the United

Nations Human Rights Council (UN HRC) and leading human-rights organisations confirm that israel's conduct in Gaza meets this threshold, and that the continued transfer of weapons or technical support constitutes participation in a crime of the highest order.

In *South Africa v Israel* (Case 192), the ICJ held that israel's actions in Gaza are 'plausibly genocidal' and that there exists a 'real and imminent risk' to the Palestinian people's survival (ICJ 2024). The Court ordered israel to 'take all measures within its power to prevent the commission of acts falling within the scope of Article II of the Genocide Convention' and to ensure that its military 'does not commit any of the above-described acts' (ICJ 2024). This ruling affirmed that every State Party to the Convention has an obligation to prevent genocide, including by withholding any form of material or financial assistance.

That precedent was reinforced in *Nicaragua v Germany* (Case 196), where the Court examined whether German arms exports to israel could breach the duty to prevent genocide. The ICJ reiterated that States must 'refrain from providing assistance that could facilitate [the commission of genocide]', warning that continued weapons transfers could 'plausibly engage' the exporting state's responsibility (ICJ 2025, para. 27). These judgments define a clear legal perimeter: when genocidal risk is established, neutrality becomes complicity.

The United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry later confirmed that Israel 'has committed and is continuing to commit genocide against the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip' (UN HRC 2025, A/HRC/60/CRP.3, sec. II). It documented acts including 'killing, causing serious bodily or mental harm, deliberately inflicting conditions of life calculated to bring about the destruction of the Palestinians ... and imposing measures intended to prevent births' (UN HRC 2025, A/HRC/60/CRP.3). The Commission urged Member States to 'cease the transfer of arms and other equipment that may be used for the commission of genocidal acts', and warned that 'when clear signs and evidence of genocide emerge, the absence of action to stop it amounts to complicity' (UN HRC 2025, A/HRC/60/CRP.3).

Parallel findings were delivered in the Special Rapporteur's report to the 59th Session of the Human Rights Council, which observed that 'far too many corporate entities have profited from the Israeli economy of illegal occupation, apartheid and now genocide' (UN HRC 2024, A/HRC/59/23). The report made explicit that commercial involvement in Israel's military economy, including the supply of weapons, communications systems, or surveillance technologies, engages the liability of both states and private companies.

Amnesty International Australia reached the same conclusion, warning that 'supplying components or materials that facilitate

war crimes can result in legal liability for both states and corporations' (Amnesty International Australia 2025). It called on the Australian Government to 'immediately suspend export permits ... pending legally binding assurances that these items will not be re-exported to Israel' (Amnesty International Australia 2025). The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights added that 'the transfer of weapons and ammunition to Israel may constitute serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian laws and risk State complicity in international crimes, possibly including genocide' (OHCHR 2024).

Taken together, these judicial and institutional findings collapse the distinction between economic cooperation and criminal complicity. Once evidence of genocidal acts is established, legality cannot serve as moral cover. Corporations and governments that continue to supply arms, research, or logistical support to Israel participate in a system that international law now recognises as plausibly genocidal. The ICJ's orders, corroborated by UN investigations, transform what might once have been dismissed as political opinion into a matter of record: neutrality, in this context, is complicity before the law.

Following the formal recognition of genocide by the International Court of Justice and the United Nations, the space for denial has narrowed. The evidence is no longer interpretive; it is judicial. Yet as this evidence solidifies, the response from the arms

industry is not accountability but performance. Corporations implicated in the production and supply of weapons to Israel have shifted from denial to administrative self-absolution. They invoke legality, regulation, and compliance as moral insulation—transforming bureaucratic language into a defence against ethical scrutiny. What international law now names as genocide is reframed by these corporations as procedure.

BAE Systems typifies this manoeuvre. The company stated that 'the situation in Israel and Palestine is having a devastating impact on civilians in the region and we hope it can be resolved as soon as possible,' but in the same statement emphasised that it 'operates under the tightest regulation and complies fully with all applicable defence export controls, which are subject to ongoing assessment' (BAE Systems 2024). The appearance of empathy becomes a technology of distance: humanitarian concern is expressed only to be neutralised by the reassurance of compliance. The invocation of law functions here not as accountability but as aesthetic—an image of order concealing the material continuity of violence.

Lockheed Martin performs a similar gesture. The company 'declares that it is proud of the significant role it has fulfilled in the security of the State of Israel,' noting that its 'industrial participation agreements with Israeli defence companies are expected to exceed \$6 billion' (Lockheed Martin Israel 2025). During an investor call, its CEO 'highlighted the Israel and

Ukraine conflicts as potential drivers for increased revenue in the coming years' (American Friends Service Committee 2024). The statement makes the calculus explicit: genocide and market confidence are structurally intertwined. Profit appears as the metric of inevitability, transforming destruction into financial performance.

Thales likewise cloaks its participation in the language of compliance. Activists have stated that 'Thales is fully, in fact, not only implicated, but profiting from the genocide in Gaza ... exporting arms and ammunition and doing deals with Israel' (Sydney Criminal Lawyers 2024). Amnesty International Australia confirmed that research 'found it likely that Thales was supplying 155 mm artillery ammunition shells and completed M795 155 mm projectiles to Israel, via an approved export permit to the United States' (Amnesty International Australia 2025). The circular logic of legality is self-protective: the export is justified by its compliance, even when its destination and purpose are unambiguous. The law is cited not to prevent atrocity but to legitimate its continuation.

This rhetorical structure extends across the industry. The UN Special Rapporteur observed that 'while political leaders and Governments shirk their obligations, far too many corporate entities have profited from the Israeli economy of illegal occupation, apartheid and now genocide' (UN OHCHR 2025). Corporate declarations of regulatory adherence thus function

not as evidence of restraint but as the lingua franca of impunity. The bureaucratic idiom of certification and oversight displaces moral accountability, recasting violence as administration.

Through this inversion, the companies most enmeshed in destruction appear as responsible global actors. Their press releases evoke the grammar of order, not atrocity; their compliance regimes become public-relations architectures that translate minimal legal conformity into moral virtue. Within this system, genocide is not denied—it is managed. Law, once a mechanism of prevention, is repurposed as cover: a framework through which atrocity continues, documented, audited, and officially approved.

The rhetoric of legality and compliance that shields arms corporations from moral accountability finds its institutional echo within RMIT University. The university's public image as a site of creativity, innovation, and social progress conceals a deeper entanglement with the global war economy. Beneath the language of research excellence and industry partnership lies a material alliance with the corporations arming Israel's campaign of extermination in Gaza. The university's defence collaborations are not peripheral—they are infrastructural. Through its research centres, grants, and co-branded projects, RMIT integrates itself into the same military-industrial network that international law now identifies as complicit in genocide.

RMIT's own Defence and Aerospace Centre 'advertises its partnership with many entities [...] including Boeing Australia and Boeing Defence Australia, BAE Systems, [...] and Thales Australia' (RMIT 2024). Each of these corporations is directly implicated in the production and supply of weapons used to ethnically cleanse the Palestinian people. Boeing's GBU-39 bombs and F-15 fighter jets have been 'dropped widely on Gaza' (AFSC 2024; Anadolu Agency 2025); BAE's M109 howitzers have fired 'tens of thousands of 155 mm shells into the Gaza Strip' (Anadolu Agency 2025); Thales Australia has exported components for attack drones used 'against Palestinian civilians' (Disclose 2024). By promoting collaboration with these same firms as technological advancement, RMIT transforms instruments of death into instruments of prestige.

The university celebrates these partnerships with the language of progress. In 2021, RMIT announced that 'Boeing and RMIT partner to build space manufacturing capability ... leveraging Boeing and RMIT's joint expertise and facilities, we believe we can unlock boundless future opportunities for Australian industry' (RMIT 2021). The statement's vocabulary—boundless, future, innovation—is not neutral. It aestheticises militarisation, recoding weapon production as national aspiration. A similar 2019 release declared that 'a joint research agreement ... was signed in Melbourne by Thales and RMIT University' to enhance 'Australia's growing space industry' (Australian Defence Magazine 2019). Rheinmetall, another RMIT collaborator,

confirmed that its 'development teams will work alongside research teams from [...] the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT)' (Rheinmetall 2020) to advance autonomous military vehicles. Even Lockheed Martin, the manufacturer of the F-16s and F-35s used to bomb Gaza, partners with RMIT 'to investigate new materials and new processing routes for metal additive manufacturing' (Laser Focus World 2017).

This network situates RMIT not as a passive observer but as an active node in the circulation of militarised research. The university's rhetoric of innovation and capability-building naturalises collaboration with arms dealers under the guise of applied science. Its century-long history as 'a partner of Australia's defence sector for 100 years' (RMIT n.d.) is recast as legacy rather than complicity. Within this framework, 'industry collaboration' becomes moral laundering: the mechanism through which military funding is converted into reputational capital. As Petrossiants observes, 'managers and board members might relish the exhibition of similar politically informed art as a way of pretending to be "allies" of antiwar sentiments while profiting from those wars, if it fits in the forms of presentation dictated by the museum' (Petrossiants & Rosales 2022: 19). The same aesthetic logic governs the university: the appearance of ethical progress becomes the form through which structural violence is reproduced.

The contradiction is total. RMIT markets itself as a socially responsible university committed to ‘sustainability,’ ‘justice,’ and ‘planetary care,’ even as its research infrastructure strengthens the same corporations responsible for mass civilian death. By embedding the production of violence within its academic identity, the university enacts the convergence of knowledge and power that makes genocide administratively invisible. Each co-authored press release and collaborative grant becomes a document of consent—evidence that empire’s logic has been domesticated into the everyday language of research.

RMIT’s partnerships are not abstract affiliations; they are material endorsements that bind the institution to the infrastructure of warfare. In aligning itself with the architects of mass death, RMIT ceases to function as a university in any meaningful sense of the term. It becomes a legitimising arm of empire—one that perfects the moral grammar of complicity under the banner of progress.

RMIT’s cultural partnerships mirror its industrial ones. The university’s collaboration with the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) and its alignment with zionist philanthropies such as the Gandel Foundation extend its complicity from the field of weapons research into the domain of cultural legitimacy. Through these alliances, the language of virtue—creativity, regeneration, inclusion—becomes a vehicle for laundering violence.

In July 2025, RMIT announced a partnership with the NGV that would “explore possible regenerative futures for our world, and how we can move towards them together” (RMIT 2025). NGV Director Tony Ellwood described the collaboration as proof that “design can be used as a powerful force to improve the social and environmental health of the planet” (NGV 2025). The project’s language of planetary health and social renewal functions as a rhetorical inversion: an institution materially linked to weapons manufacturing now presents itself as an agent of planetary care. The moral contradictions embedded in this partnership are obscured by the soothing vocabulary of design and sustainability.

This partnership exists within a broader network of cultural and philanthropic relations anchored by the Gandel Foundation, whose financial influence extends across both RMIT and the NGV. According to CEO Vedran Drakulić, the foundation’s community grants aim to “help new and emerging communities, especially young people, feel at home, feel engaged and involved” (Gandel Foundation 2021). In practice, this same foundation funds the Gandel Rehabilitation Centre in Jerusalem, praised by Hadassah Australia for helping to build “a more comprehensive and more inclusive health system in Israel” (Hadassah Australia 2024). The centre’s stated mission is to rehabilitate injured IDF soldiers—a program that converts military recovery into a philanthropic cause.

John Gandel himself has been explicit in his support for Israel's military actions, stating that the state "had no choice but to hammer Gaza," adding that "if they don't go all out it means they withdraw. They can't do it gently" (Gandel in *Australian Financial Review* 2023). The brutality of this declaration sits uneasily beside the moral aura of his family's cultural giving. Yet within Australian arts institutions, this contradiction is rarely acknowledged. The Zionist Federation of Australia thanked the Gandels for their "ongoing commitment to Jewish continuity," praising them for giving young Jews "a life-changing connection to Israel" (Zionist Federation of Australia 2013). Within the NGV, Ellwood publicly praised Pauline Gandel's "generous contribution to this new gallery space" (NGV 2019). These endorsements transform the political project of zionist state-building into the appearance of civic generosity.

When activists attempted to challenge this entanglement, they were met with the familiar charge of antisemitism. Victorian Premier Jacinta Allan told parliament that "targeting Jewish philanthropy is not activism, it's antisemitism," insisting that the Gandels "deserve thanks" for their arts philanthropy (Victorian Parliament Hansard 2025). This manoeuvre protects donors and institutions alike: critique of power is reclassified as prejudice, while cultural complicity is shielded under the rhetoric of tolerance.

Meanwhile, public dissent grows elsewhere. At the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra's London performance, protesters shouted that the orchestra "has blood on its hands," accusing it of "complicity in genocide" (The Age 2025). The same logic applies to RMIT and the NGV: institutions that partner with funders who openly endorse militarism cannot meaningfully claim moral neutrality. The Gandels' sponsorship of the NGV, described by the foundation as an act of cultural stewardship, functions as soft power—part of a system that frames Israeli militarism as humanitarian enterprise. As one report noted, "despite protests over their sponsorship, the Gandels vowed to continue funding NGV exhibitions," an act that "exemplifies the artwashing of militarism through philanthropy" (*Sydney Morning Herald* 2025).

What emerges is a continuous circuit of moral translation. Weapons research becomes "innovation." Arms recovery becomes "rehabilitation." Ideological indoctrination becomes "youth engagement." In each case, the violence of empire is rewritten as care, and culture becomes the medium through which this transformation is made palatable. The Gandel Foundation's philanthropic language—echoed in RMIT's partnerships and NGV's curatorial statements—functions as empire's moral prosthetic, allowing destruction to appear as benevolence. Through these entanglements, RMIT and its partners do not merely reflect the moral failures of the age; they administer them.

The violence of empire no longer depends on colonial spectacle. It endures through a new order—through the smooth functioning of institutions that mistake their procedures for ethics.

Bureaucracy becomes feeling; policy becomes faith. Within this order, virtue is not opposed to domination but is its most refined expression: the language through which destruction is rendered necessary, even good. The university, the gallery, the foundation —each perfects the same translation of violence into virtue, of annihilation into administration.

Yet this coherence also marks a point of rupture. Institutions can accommodate critique, but only when it flatters their image of reflexivity; they celebrate dissent that confirms their openness, not the kind that threatens their foundations. The most vital resistance, then, is not critique within the institution but struggle against it—where refusal ceases to be symbolic and becomes structural. As Shellyne Rodriguez writes, “as long as these board members’ wealth—that is generated via global, capitalist extraction—remains integral to the way that these museums function, then refusal is just a form of self-preservation, a fight against the systems that want to kill us” (Petrossiants & Rosales 2022: 19). Resistance begins here: not in the discursive magnitude of institutional validation, but in the material unworking of the infrastructures that reproduce death as culture.

Closing Notes

If the aesthetic of virtue describes how empire sustains itself through moral form, the question that follows is one of praxis: what can be done when even refusal is absorbed as evidence of reflexivity? Exposure, critique, and care have all been converted into functions of governance. The next task is not to reveal what is already visible but to interrupt the systems that make violence feel ethical.

The Aesthetics of Action begins from this impasse. It asks what practices can resist being administered—what it means to act when every gesture risks being aestheticised into virtue. Action here is not reform, expression, or redemption, but interruption: the unworking of moral infrastructure at the level of form and relation. The problem is no longer how to represent violence, but how to stop participating in its reproduction.

Chapter 4

Action

To become a subject, Hegel writes, is to uphold the work of death—the destruction through which truth is attained (Mbembe, 2019:69). The artist, too, becomes subject only by submitting to this labour: by allowing art to die within them. The unworking of the artwork mirrors the dialectic of Spirit—a passage through dismemberment where aesthetic selfhood dissolves into praxis. The life of art, like Spirit, assumes death and lives with it. What emerges is not the end of creation, but its transfiguration: truth as consequence.

Bataille reminds us that death is not pure negation but a “power of proliferation” (Mbembe, 2019:69–70). Putrefaction is not absence but a form of excess—the stench of becoming. The corpse of art is not void but fertile decay: a site where form decomposes into the material of collective life. The artist’s death, then, is not tragic but generative. It marks the moment when art ceases to be object and becomes condition—a living contagion that circulates as politics. In this sense, the end of art is not disappearance but diffusion.

Sovereignty, Mbembe writes, “calls for the risk of death” (2019:70–71). The sovereign act transgresses its own limit, living as if death were not. Art that renders itself unrecognisable performs precisely this gesture. In unworking its autonomy, it becomes sovereign not through mastery, but through the relinquishment of mastery. Its sovereignty is its vulnerability—the risk of no longer being art. This is the political threshold: the

passage from representation to exposure, from subject to relation.

Blanchot locates this movement in art's abdication of itself. Once "the absolute consciously became the active process which is history," he writes, "everything that was authentically true and alive in it now belongs to the world and to real, purposeful activity" (1982:214). The artist faithful to art must therefore renounce it—"renounces it and, out of fidelity, renounces himself" (1982:213–214). To continue art is to abandon it; to preserve its truth is to let it enter the world. This renunciation is not nihilism but fidelity to transformation—the death that allows life to continue in another form.

Gregory Sholette names the debris of this process *dark matter*—the surplus labour, informal practices, and minor gestures that sustain the art world yet remain invisible within it. "The once-hidden surplus archive is now eating its host," he writes (2011:8). The image captures art's terminal stage: a metabolism feeding on its own remains. Within this decay, a new horizon emerges—the shift from invisibility to politics. "When the excluded are made visible," Sholette observes, "it is always ultimately a matter of politics and a rethinking of history" (2011:3). The corpse of art becomes the compost of praxis.

Negativity thus reaches its limit. Destruction no longer negates but proliferates; absence no longer erases but reconstitutes relation. Art's sovereignty, once grounded in detachment, now

survives only through its dissolution into the world. Its highest autonomy lies not in separation but in entanglement—the refusal to remain apart. To act politically is not to abandon art, but to fulfil its final promise: autonomy through immersion, sovereignty through surrender. Political action is the last form of art that remains free. In this condition, the artist must die so that the collective may act; the aesthetic survives as the texture of political life.

The Aesthetic of Action

When the mythologies of art are dismantled, what remains is not absence but potential. Beneath every exhausted form persists an ethical and political residue: the desire to make freedom perceptible. The “death of art” is not a terminal event but a perpetual metamorphosis—a quantum unworking in which each collapse generates another horizon. Art should migrate into action, into gestures and resistances that no longer need to call themselves art, as the only way to fulfil its function. Art survives not as category but as potentiality; it lives on as praxis.

The aesthetic and political are indistinguishable

The aesthetic has never been an innocent sensory domain. It is the medium through which power organises what can be seen, valued, and believed. This was the burden of the aesthetic in its modern form: the field through which domination arranges perception, naturalising hierarchy as taste. Yet precisely

because the aesthetic produces power, it can also redistribute it. Every order of visibility carries the seeds of its own reconfiguration.

To aestheticise is to legislate perception; to refuse this is already a political act. The aesthetic is not parallel to politics—it *is* politics, the sensorium through which social reality becomes thinkable. To neglect this is itself a political act of erasure, a refusal to recognise the aesthetic as the infrastructure of governance. The aesthetic is where power appears—and therefore where it can be resisted.

The civil as art's transfiguration

Ariella Azoulay calls this shared field of appearance *the civil*—the open space in which human relations are exposed to one another in public. “The political,” she writes, “is but a space of human relations exposed to each other in public, and photography is one of the realisations of this space” (2010:252). The civil is not a metaphor for art but its transfiguration: the social world where encounters take place, where visibility becomes a form of relation, and where resistance emerges from collective exposure.

In this field, appearance itself is political—a shared risk that cannot be owned, mastered, or secured. “Going beyond the limits of the professional discourse,” Azoulay writes, “might lead towards the civil—the space in which the existence of others is

not pre-determined, and their participation... is prerequisite" (2010:258). Art's highest form is no longer the bounded object or performance but the act of *co-appearance*: social bodies gathering within structures of domination to confront and reconfigure them. The political event becomes the aesthetic form.

For Azoulay, this space is not the achievement of freedom but the enactment of resistance—the ongoing struggle against structures that predetermine who can appear and how. "Political space," she writes, "is present whenever people assemble together, and it can—at any given moment—realise its inherent potential" (2010:254). That potential is not liberation's completion but its continual practice. Art's relevance depends on its capacity to act within this practice—to generate relations that are unpredictable, non-sovereign, and insurgent.

The civil, therefore, is the aesthetic of action: a horizon where appearance becomes resistance, and where the act of being seen together is itself a refusal of the order that decides who is allowed to appear at all.

From product to process, from work to action

Azoulay's claim that "photography ontologically resembles action more than work" (2008:129) reframes the ontology of art itself. Art is not a product to be circulated, nor a process to be swallowed and instrumentalised by neoliberal schema. It is an

attempted intervention within the empirical and social—an interruption of the aesthetic field through which power is sensed and organised. Art, in this sense, is a disruption within the sensorial order of domination: an act that provokes further acts, a disturbance that ripples through perception and relation.

The work, therefore, is not the object but the disturbance it initiates—the unpredictable proliferation of responses, affects, and solidarities that exceed its frame. It belongs to what Hannah Arendt calls the *vita activa*: “the realm in which people exist side by side with each other and their various actions directly or indirectly impact the lives of others” (Azoulay, 2010:254). Within this field, art ceases to be representation and becomes relation; it no longer mirrors the world but participates in its reorganisation.

Azoulay’s notion of a “citizenry without sovereignty, without place or borders, without language or unity... having a common praxis” (2008:123) names this collective transformation. The *civil contract of photography*, she argues, “shifts the focus away from the ethics of seeing or viewing to an ethics of the spectator” (2008:122–123). To act—or even to look—is to enter a network of responsibility, a field where every gesture constitutes an aesthetic and political event. The spectator is no longer passive but implicated in a circuit of mutual address and potential solidarity.

Yet, as in all political life, this relationality remains entangled within domination—the aesthetic burden persists. Art acts from within the very conditions it seeks to resist. But this entanglement does not neutralise its power; it grounds it. The artwork, reconceived as action, is never pure—it is compromised, contingent, and alive. Its vitality lies precisely in its impurity: its capacity to act within the world that constrains it.

The Aesthetic of Action as Immanent Autonomy

Autonomy no longer withdraws from the world; it acts within it. Its horizon is not purity but struggle—the moment when an aesthetic gesture alters the texture of the social world from inside its constraints. The *aesthetic of action* names this condition: acts that move through domination while exposing its fractures, creating temporary openings where power's order loses coherence.

Such actions—riots, blockades, occupations, revolutions raised against authority—are aesthetic not because they are deemed art, but because they reorganise the sensible field through which power appears. They transform space, affect, and visibility; they redistribute who can be seen and what can be said. The aesthetic, once confined to the gallery or theatre, persists as the street, the assembly, the crowd, the moment of rupture.

This is autonomy's contemporary form: the refusal that unfolds inside what it refuses. Political action performs the aesthetic from within the very conditions that negate it. Every act of resistance is a reconfiguration of perception, an intervention into the lived grammar of domination. The protest, the strike, the riot are not analogies of art but continuations of its labour—the aesthetic practice of reorganising the world.

To act, then, is to perform autonomy immanently: to turn appearance itself into resistance, to inhabit the contradictions that sustain power while bending them toward another horizon. The aesthetic of action is not representation but transformation —the material process through which the social world becomes visible as struggle.

Refusal as fidelity

Maurice Blanchot understood this as art's ethical destiny. "Nothing is more important," he writes, "than this absolute autonomy which is refusal and than this refusal which, through a change in sign, is also the most prodigious affirmation" (1982:215). Refusal is not withdrawal but affirmation otherwise. It is the gift that gives without justification, the refusal that grounds justice.

"The poet," Blanchot continues, "will complete the sense of his message by renouncing himself, then will join the side of those who... assure the eternal return of the smuggler of justice"

(1982:214). To renounce is not to negate but to transform. The artist's fidelity to art culminates in its abandonment—the refusal to reproduce the structures of power that sustain it.

This refusal is fidelity lived as struggle. It transforms art from representation into action, from mastery into solidarity. The artist becomes the actor in history rather than its ornament. As Blanchot writes, "We must not depict the murder of Caesar; we must be Brutus" (1982:213). To act, not to illustrate action, is the ethical imperative of art after its own demise.

The unpredictable subject

Claire Bishop extends this transformation into the social field. "Art," she writes, "is perceived both as too removed from the real world and yet as the only space from which it is possible to experiment" (2012:26–27). This paradox defines art's potential: it must remain autonomous enough to imagine otherwise, yet embedded enough to intervene.

Bishop identifies this potential in what she calls "the invention of an unpredictable subject who momentarily occupies the street, the factory, or the museum" (2012:283). Political acts such as protests, strikes, and occupations are aesthetic because they reorder visibility—they reconfigure who can appear, speak, and be recognised. "Aesthetics and politics," she insists, "overlap in their concern for the distribution and sharing out of ideas, abilities and experiences... it is not possible to conceive of an

aesthetic judgement that is not at the same time a political judgement" (2012:27–28).

The unpredictable subject—whether protester, occupier, or organiser—performs art's transmutation into collective action. Even atmosphere and affect belong to this expanded aesthetic field: anger, care, exhaustion, solidarity. The aesthetic of action is the affective materialism of struggle, where bodies and emotions compose the politics of appearance.

Political action as the last art form

If art once promised autonomy through detachment, it now achieves it through engagement. The only remaining form of art is political action itself—those gestures, refusals, and solidarities that no longer resemble art but carry its emancipatory charge.

León Ferrari pushed this to its extreme: "Art will be neither beauty nor novelty; art will be efficacy and disturbance... an accomplished work of art will be that which, in the artist's environment, can make an impact similar to the one caused by a terrorist act in a country struggling for its freedom" (Bishop, 2012:127–128). The force of this statement lies not in violence but in its ethics: art as intervention, risk, and disturbance. Art that acts rather than adorns, that enters the world without mediation.

The aesthetic of action names this shift: from beauty to efficacy, from representation to transformation. Political action is not outside art; it is art's ultimate form.

Contradiction as truth

Boris Groys provides the philosophical hinge. "Only self-contradictory practices are true in a deeper sense of the word," he writes (2014:9). The aesthetic of action inherits art's contradictions—its simultaneous failure and necessity—as its very condition.

Activism embodies this contradiction: it must operate within the systems it seeks to abolish, relying on their infrastructures even as it contests them. Yet this contradiction is the source of its truth. "By defunctionalising the status quo," Groys argues, "art prefigures its coming revolutionary overturn" (2014:9). Art's failure to function within the world's logics is what enables it to imagine another.

"Total aestheticisation," Groys continues, "means that we see the current status quo as already dead... [it] creates the ultimate horizon for successful political action" (2014:12). To act as if the present order were already obsolete is to open the space of revolution. Contradiction, rather than coherence, becomes the ground of transformation. Resistance—even when futile—is art's final truth.

Collective refusal as art's afterlife

Gregory Sholette names the diffuse field of such practices *creative dark matter*: the unrecognised, invisible, and unprofitable forms of artistic labour that sustain the art world while remaining excluded from its economy. "By choice or circumstance," he writes, "it displays a degree of autonomy from the critical and economic structures of the art world by moving instead in-between its meshes" (2011:4–5).

These practices—street theatre, activist collectives, community art, mutual aid—constitute art's subterranean life. They enact what Sholette calls "an emerging aesthetics of resistance [that] frees itself from even attempting to be usefully productive for capitalism" (2011:188). In their refusal of productivity lies a rediscovery of art's most radical promise: to create not objects but forms of life.

This field of collective refusal is art's afterlife. It is not the negation of form but its dispersal into everyday resistance. "Workers 'expressively' killing time in a factory," Sholette notes, reveal that "capitalism continues to be haunted by what it has promised and failed to deliver: a life rich in human solidarity and sensual, aesthetic expressivity" (2011:28–29). The ghost of aesthetic freedom persists as the political unconscious of labour, the unrecorded pulse of creative life under domination.

Art's vitality now exists in this dark matter—in gestures of solidarity, care, and disobedience that escape commodification. These are the real avant-gardes: invisible, collective, and insurgent.

The convergence: art dissolves into praxis

Political action is therefore not art's negation but its transformation. It realises what the aesthetic could only gesture toward: the appearance of freedom in common. The *vita activa* —the realm of mutual impact and shared risk—becomes the medium in which art fulfils its suspended promise.

To act is to enter a field where autonomy survives only through its surrender, where mastery dissolves into co-appearance. The protest, the blockade, the strike, the collective act of care—these are not analogies of art but its living forms. They are works without authors, compositions without audiences, aesthetics without property.

In them, creation becomes indistinguishable from relation; freedom ceases to be representation and becomes event. The aesthetic of action is not the annihilation of art but its unworking completed: art's self-abolition into the collective life it always implied.

Art's final autonomy lies in this disappearance—its passage into praxis, its realisation as the world made together. To act, to

appear, to risk relation: these are the aesthetic forms of the present. Art's disappearance is not death but arrival. The aesthetic of action names this convergence of creation and freedom, where the unworking of art meets the living labour of the collective.

Where *The Aesthetic Burden* diagnosed the aesthetic as the infrastructure of power, *The Aesthetic of Action* reclaims it as the horizon of freedom. The burden of aesthetics—the compulsion to make power appear beautiful, coherent, and moral—culminates in exhaustion. But from that exhaustion emerges another possibility: the aesthetic as the collective production of freedom, the sensorium of shared struggle.

To unwork art is to liberate its potential. In dissolving its forms, it returns to the world as praxis. The artist dies so that the collective may act; the aesthetic survives as the texture of political life.

Art's final gesture, then, is not to represent the world but to create it together—to become indistinguishable from the political actions that make life visible, risky, and free.

'...An accomplished work of art will... make an impact similar to the one caused by a terrorist act in a country struggling for its freedom.' - León Ferrari

If the *Aesthetic of Action* names autonomy as immanent struggle—resistance enacted within domination—then the university becomes its most refined stage. If empire operates as a neoliberal aesthetic regime, the university is its most perfected model: where ethics becomes procedure, virtue administration, and critique an object of care. Its coherence depends on converting domination into moral order—an aesthetic in which empathy and inclusion function as technologies of control. What appears as support is often the soft machinery of compliance.

Within this order, the self-directed project is presented as an exercise in freedom. “A project where you take ownership of the creative focuses in your work,” the brief promises, “where you’re not initially directed by teaching staff” (RMIT BFA Studio Brief, 2025). It speaks the language of autonomy, individuality, and problem-solving—hallmarks of neoliberal selfhood translated into pedagogy. But this is autonomy as performance: the curriculum of freedom administered as learning outcome, the aesthetic of virtue disguised as empowerment.

The brief’s binary between “idea-led” and “making-led” practice reinstates the very division that the *Aesthetic of Action* seeks to dissolve. Thinking and making are not opposing categories but recursive processes that continually unwork one another. To separate them is to misrecognise their entanglement—to manage freedom by assigning it a form. The call to “work without preconceptions” and “approach your work through

process and experiment" (RMIT BFA Studio Brief, 2025) aestheticises indeterminacy as method, curating uncertainty as a mode of compliance. Freedom becomes procedural; experimentation becomes a learning metric.

In this framework, materiality is valorised as content. "Materiality is always content," the brief insists (RMIT BFA Studio Brief, 2025). Yet materiality is not simply what art consists of; it is what art confronts—the material conditions of its own possibility. Materiality is the interface between domination and resistance, the site where the aesthetic of virtue meets the aesthetic of action. To engage material critically is to recognise that it includes not only pigment or paper, but also the infrastructures of visibility and legitimacy that condition their use.

From here, the project moved outward, into the public and administrative field. The posters—*RMIT Profits from War*, *RMIT Joins NGV as Genocide Partner*, *A Fascist Is on Our Campus*—were designed to interrupt the university's aesthetic of virtue. Each work used *détournement* to return institutional language to its source. The clean typography, corporate palette, and declarative tone mimicked the university's own publicity, exposing the violence beneath its rhetoric of care. Their calmness was confrontation; their clarity, refusal. In doing so, they materialised what *The Aesthetic Burden* names as the indistinction of domination and sensibility: the way institutional

virtue and symbolic violence operate through the same aesthetic grammar.



When the project entered the administrative sphere—through consultations, supervisory meetings, and private discussions—it revealed the precise limit of institutional reflexivity. Universities that pride themselves on openness to critique, diversity of thought, and “critical practice” often sustain these values as aesthetic posture. Dissent, when safely abstracted, affirms the institution’s self-image as progressive. But when critique

becomes structural—when it names the university as participant in the systems it claims to oppose—the performance falters.

What follows is not prohibition but modulation: condescension masquerading as care, authority softened by concern.

The responses to the posters exemplified this collapse of tolerance into containment. The works were dismissed as “naïve,” “stupid,” or “not clever”—judgements that displaced the question of power into one of style. Exposure was reframed as ineffective and irresponsible: *this isn’t going to change anything; you could be expelled; someone’s job could be endangered*.

Other remarks—*is politics even art? perhaps you should be in a politics course*—translated structural critique into categorical error. The irony, of course, is that the previous brief—written by the same lecturer who, in asking whether p’olitics was even art, questioned the epistemological ground of my “political” work—had declared that “*materials are inherently political*” (RMIT BFA Studio Brief, 2025). To assert politics as an inherent property of materiality, and then reject its enactment when it names the university as material, exposes the reflexive hypocrisy of the neoliberal aesthetic regime. Politics is permissible only when aestheticised—when framed as concept, not confrontation. The political is welcome as content, but not as consequence. Thus, the university’s ethics of “criticality” operates as an aesthetic boundary: politics in theory, not in practice.

Such exchanges do not deviate from the neoliberal aesthetic regime; they perfect it. The institution's reflexive openness functions as a circuit of self-legitimation: it aestheticises critique as evidence of its own moral capacity. Yet this openness endures only so long as critique remains external or symbolic—so long as it can be curated as an expression of institutional conscience. When dissent becomes immanent—when the object of critique is the institution itself—the reflexive surface fractures.



What once appeared as empathy hardens into governance; care reveals itself as control.

The atmosphere that followed these discussions confirmed this logic. Meetings were suspended between care and coercion; the rhetoric of support became the medium of containment.

Bureaucratic silence replaced decision: requests for clarification went unanswered, transforming non-response into policy by other means. Censorship was unnecessary; prohibition operated affectively, through exhaustion, uncertainty, and the moral appeal of civility. This is the threshold where the neoliberal aesthetic regime begins to falter—where its promise of openness encounters the conditions of its own reproduction.

After many meetings, I was allowed to put the posters up as if nothing had happened. They sparked interesting discussions that appeared to hold space for dissent. But soon, the familiar metabolism of the institution resumed. The critique was not rejected; it was absorbed. The dissent was not silenced; it was metabolised. Art's perfect prison. The aesthetics of action, within this group tutorial or institutional frame, did not disrupt—it only became neutralised. What appears as resistance is only digestion: critique transformed into evidence of institutional health.

The project thus exposed the final logic of the neoliberal aesthetic regime: its ability to aestheticise even its own undoing. Within this order, critique functions as aesthetic fuel until it

becomes diagnosis. Institutions thrive on being seen as sites of questioning, dialogue, and criticality—but only while those gestures reaffirm their moral centrality. The moment critique ceases to orbit and begins to pierce, the choreography of virtue collapses. What remains is the bare structure of power: affective control sustained through civility, legitimacy maintained through care.



The posters made this collapse visible, revealing that the university's most fragile site is not its public image but its moral self-conception. In this sense, the self-directed project fulfilled the *Aesthetic of Action* not by illustrating it, but by becoming it. The project acted within domination to reveal its texture; it performed autonomy immanently, as struggle. Each poster, conversation, and silence became part of a larger composition—a choreography of refusal that rendered visible the quiet aesthetic regimes. The university became the medium, the work—a partial diagnosis of the machine.

Closing Notes

To write about the aesthetic of action is to move beyond critique toward consequence. The question is no longer what virtue conceals, but how it can be unmade. The institution has perfected the art of absorption: every exposure becomes evidence of its openness, every act of refusal another citation of care. Within this regime, dissent must learn to disappear on its own terms—to become ungovernable by the moral grammars that seek to manage it.

Action, in this sense, is not expression but subtraction. It withdraws from administration, from the aesthetic of virtue that renders domination coherent. It reclaims the affective capacities of care, relation, and solidarity from the bureaucracies that have neutralised them. To act is to return ethics to the world, unmediated by procedure.

The task now is to re-enter the civil field—not as critics, but as accomplices. The aesthetic of action begins where the institution ends: in the shared risk of relation, the unlearning of virtue as form, and the construction of freedom as practice. The aesthetic no longer represents struggle; it becomes its medium.

Chapter 5

Violence

In the Face of Fascist Violence



What brings us to the aesthetics of action is not abstraction but an emergency of the present. On 31 August 2025, neo-Nazis stormed Camp Sovereignty—a sacred First Nations site in Melbourne—shortly after marching at the front of the *March for Australia* anti-immigration rally. Reporting by *Al Jazeera* and *The Guardian* traced the attack, injuries, and police response, locating it within an escalating pattern of organised far-right mobilisation (Thevarajah, *Al Jazeera*, 2025; Convery, *The Guardian*, 2025).

That day arrived as rupture. It could not be integrated smoothly into the sequence of thought because it dislocated the very terms through which I had been writing. The slow work of theorising taste, refusal, and asymptotic unworking became minor when confronted with the immediacy of state force and

fascist violence. What I had described as systemic coercion and recursive capture appeared directly, without mediation. Theory collapsed into the body; critique became survival.

The day wrote itself through the materiality of oppression. Weapons, violence, and other tactics were not incidental but the grammar of power itself—the syntax by which bodies were made legible to the state. The body was not a witness but an inscription surface: degraded, suffocated, forced into exhaustion and apathy.

The presence of the far right saturated the atmosphere. What Sara Ahmed (2014) calls the affective economy of hate—the circulation of grievance as pride, fear as patriotism—was materialised in chants shouted openly in the streets: “Send them back.” “I love Hitler.” “Deport, deport, deport.” Hatred was not coded; it was declared. The ideological mask slipped, and it slipped under police protection. Contradictions abounded: neo-Nazis beside Zionist Jews, people of colour and immigrants siding with ethnonationalism. Fascism does not require coherence; it thrives on contradiction, drawing disparate identities into a shared performance of exclusion.

The state did not stand apart from this spectacle; it sustained it through its deployment of force and presence. The heavy deployment of police was not neutral enforcement but structured alignment. Officers stepped over the elderly who lay injured, forcing them to move instead of offering aid. Peaceful

protesters were attacked with tear-gas, rubber bullets, and batons while the *March for Australia* passed freely between police lines, untouched and uncontained. I was assaulted throughout the day despite remaining peaceful, called homophobic slurs not by fascists but by police themselves. Neutrality was not absence—it was complicity, the performance of order as collaboration.



Among the rally's speakers was neo-Nazi leader Thomas Sewell —founder of the National Socialist Network and orchestrator of the Camp Sovereignty attack—alongside RMIT student Hugo Lennon (known online as "Auspill!"), one of the event's organisers. Lennon posts openly racist, ethno-nationalist, and

anti-immigrant content online while his family's property-development business profits from empty housing and speculative real-estate investment (News.com.au, 2025; *Daily Mail*, 2025). The contradiction is telling: those decrying immigration as the cause of housing scarcity are themselves structurally enriched by it. The movement's populist rhetoric thus conceals a class project—a rebranding of privilege as grievance, xenophobia as economic realism.

The movement's iconography has merely adapted to law. After swastikas were banned in 2024, runic symbols, the number 88, and other coded numerologies proliferated—an index of strategic re-branding, not retreat (Shepherd, *The Guardian*, 2025). Investigations have since revealed that rally organisers coordinated optics directly with members of the National Socialist Network, confirming that the "mainstream" frame was a façade (Workman & Martino, *ABC News*, 2025).

The Human Rights Law Centre condemned both the violence and the linguistic sanitisation that enables it, arguing that describing these movements as merely "anti-immigration" or "patriotic" normalises white-supremacist politics (Human Rights Law Centre, 2025). Likewise, the Australia Institute cautioned that marching "alongside white supremacists and neo-Nazis" is not a hypothetical risk but the predictable outcome of such rallies (Bennett, *Australia Institute*, 2025).

These are not isolated aberrations but the visible expression of an ongoing structure. As ANTAR notes, “since European invasion in 1788, race and racism have been foundational to the logic of Australian settler colonialism and the processes by which the lands we now call Australia were stolen and settled” (ANTAR, 2025). Systemic racism remains state-sanctioned in origin, sustained through dispossession and unequal law enforcement.

Academic research situates these conditions within a wider authoritarian drift. Campion’s *Right-Wing Extremism in Australia* (2024) describes the contemporary far right as a “networked constellation” of ethnonationalist, religious, and anti-state actors whose ideology blends accelerationism, racial purity, and anti-state violence. These groups—such as the National Socialist Network and Sturmjäger Resistance—actively recruit youth online and propagate fantasies of collapse (Campion 2024: 3–4).

Mario Peucker expands this analysis sociologically: “governments, agencies and civil society may not agree on many issues, but they have all been sounding the alarm over the rise of right-wing extremism for some time now” (Peucker, ABC *Religion & Ethics*, 2025). His research shows how far-right networks now embed themselves within broader “freedom” or “anti-elite” movements, cultivating affective belonging through digital platforms and recasting hate as grievance. “These groups do not look fringe anymore; they strategically blend into mainstream narratives” (Peucker, 2025).

The Australian Human Rights Commission and Race Discrimination Commissioner Giridharan de Kretser have both acknowledged that racism is rising, calling for a national anti-racism framework and systemic education reform (de Kretser, AHRC, 2025; Australian Human Rights Commission, 2025). A June 2025 survey found a “significant rise in racism” experienced by Indigenous and multicultural communities (Sivaraman, *ABC News*, 2025). The Sydney Opera House’s 2025 forum *Is It Fascism Yet?* articulated the shared unease that “authoritarian tendencies are already here, disguised as common sense” (Sydney Opera House, 2025).

Scholars of authoritarianism caution that what seems distant is already present. Jason Stanley argues that Australia is not immune to the global fascist turn: its colonial foundations, border regimes, and party politics supply the materials from which modern fascisms are built (Stanley, *The Guardian*, 2025). The University of Southern Queensland’s *Fighting Back Fascism* initiative identifies this moment as one in which the rhetoric of freedom and the aesthetics of order intertwine to produce new forms of authoritarian affect (University of Southern Queensland, 2023).

Fascism operates through visibility and symbols presented as cultural pride. Its spectacle is aesthetic as much as ideological, relying on the same technologies of sight and reproduction that once made it modern. Against this, the protest becomes a

counter-aesthetic—an act of collective composition that reclaims visibility from the architecture of hate. The bodies in the streets, the banners, the chants: these are not symbols but structures of solidarity, refusing the state's monopoly on what may appear.

To protest in this moment is to live art's political afterlife—to transform its critical vocabulary into embodied gesture. The aesthetic of action begins here: in the refusal to let fascism define the visible world. It is a practice of making freedom perceptible within structures designed to erase it.

The Aesthetic of Control

Foucault reminds us that power is never content with coercion—it must also be seen to care and protect. Its effectiveness depends on its visibility: "power is exercised rather than possessed; it is not the property of the State but the conduct of conduct" (Foucault, 1977:26). Modern policing performs this visibility as spectacle, aestheticising its control as necessity. Mbembe sharpens this: sovereignty "means the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not" (Mbembe, 2019:71). Within this necropolitical aesthetic, domination presents itself as protection, and violence as civic hygiene.

Every public demonstration reveals this aesthetic grammar of the state. Uniforms, formations, and barricades form a tableau of

legitimacy: a choreography of power rendered as order. The police aesthetic is a language of symmetry and discipline—an image designed to conceal the chaos it creates. In Melbourne, the spectacle of law enforcement mirrors the logic of empire itself: the performance of civility masking the machinery of force.

The Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission (IBAC) has repeatedly confirmed this structural performance of power. Its *Review of Allegations of Excessive Force* found that Victoria Police investigations into misconduct were frequently “not impartial or thorough” and that findings were “not evidence-based,” with officers failing to interview complainants or address contradictions in their own reports. The review cites incidents where protesters were placed in headlocks, thrown to the ground, and struck with batons—tactics deemed dangerous even by Victoria Police’s own internal guidelines—yet consistently dismissed by internal investigators. The 2024 *IBAC Police Oversight Summary* identified that over 64 percent of all complaints it received concerned Victoria Police, with “excessive use of force” among its top categories of concern. Fewer than half of IBAC’s recommendations for reform have been implemented. Oversight itself becomes aestheticised: reform performed as transparency, accountability absorbed into ritual.

This spectacle of control was made visible again at the *Disrupt Land Forces* protest in September 2024. Following days of escalating repression, Melbourne Activist Legal Support (MALS) stated that “grossly excessive policing of protesters likely infringed on human rights,” documenting horse charges, close-range pepper-spraying, and arbitrary detention (MALS, 2024b). ABC News corroborated these accounts, reporting that multiple protesters were “thrown to the ground” and “pushed with shields” outside the Melbourne Exhibition Centre (ABC News, 2024). Legal observers and medics were also targeted; more than forty arrests were recorded. Both the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service (VALS) and the Human Rights Law Centre (HRLC) condemned the policing as unlawful and politically motivated, while Greens MPs called for an independent inquiry (Sandell, 2024; King, 2024).

Across 2023–2025, the same image reappears: pepper spray, stun grenades, rubber bullets, and violent arrests deployed to suppress dissent. IBAC confirmed that officers frequently escalated situations, misused force, and failed to justify their conduct (IBAC, 2024). MALS documented the arbitrary restriction of protest sound equipment (MALS, 2024), while *The Guardian* reported riot police blocking march routes and intimidating large, peaceful crowds (Guardian, 2025). Each act of suppression produces its own spectacle—violence performed as stability, domination rendered as discipline.

This aesthetic of control becomes especially stark in the policing of anti-racism counter-protests. At the March 2023 rally, riot squad officers punched a peaceful protester in the head; several others reported assaults and unlawful arrests (ABC News, 2023). Charges against protesters were later dropped, and multiple lawsuits were filed in 2024 (ABC News, 2024). In 2025, police deployed rubber bullets and pepper spray against anti-racist counter-protesters while allowing neo-Nazi groups to assemble freely. Indigenous activists were assaulted, while far-right agitators remained unmonitored (Age, 2025; Guardian, 2025).

The asymmetry of force is unmistakable. Police lines consistently face the anti-racists, not the fascists. Those who stand against hate are treated as the threat, while hate itself is rendered inert, a neutral background to the state's display of order. Every photograph of the riot line makes this visible: shields turned toward care, not cruelty; batons raised toward those who resist, not those who incite. This is the state's moral composition rendered as image—its neutrality performed through aggression, its civility through suppression.

The pattern extends beyond ideological protest. Environmental and climate actions are met with equal hostility. In December 2023, seventy-two Extinction Rebellion protesters were arrested and fined (Herald Sun, 2023). In March 2024, a bridge blockade led to rapid mass arrests (ABC News, 2024). Zakariah

Buchanan, who was violently slammed to the ground at the 2019 IMARC protest, received a \$90,000 settlement from Victoria Police in 2025, yet no officers were disciplined (Guardian, 2025). Civil suits, not reform, remain the only form of redress (King, 2025).

The repetition of these events—across anti-racist, anti-militarist, and climate protests—reveals a coherent aesthetic logic. The tools change—OC spray, rubber bullets, mounted police—but the choreography remains the same. Each act of repression is justified as procedure; each injury absorbed into the performance of domination. Legislation tightens, oversight weakens, and accountability dissolves into bureaucratic ritual (HRLC, 2024; VALS, 2024).

This is the aesthetic of control: the state's capacity for violence through the image of necessity. What appears as safety is discipline; what appears as order is coercion.

The Police–Media Apparatus

This choreography of state power extends beyond the police line into the camera's frame and the newsfeed's headline. During the October 2025 counter-protest against the xenophobic *March for Australia* rally, Victoria Police deployed "four flash-bangs, two stinger balls, one rubber bullet, and 50 rounds of VKS pepper balls" against demonstrators. One flash-bang landed directly between my legs as I tended to an injured protester. The

police, protected behind their own barricaded wall, hurled less-than-lethal projectiles and tear gas indiscriminately before leaping over their own barrier, escalating chaos and injuries as they aggressively kettled the anti-racist protesters back through the city. While dragging an injured protester away, a PORT officer ran full speed and struck me with his shield, knocking me to the ground. The violence continued throughout the day until the crowd was fully dispersed.



Although isolated projectiles may have been thrown, the majority of the crowd remained peaceful. Despite this, Victoria Police engaged in a coordinated escalation that included the concealment of identification, unauthorised recording, pre-emptive arming and discharge of OC spray and rubber bullets,

the use of flash-bang grenades, baton and shield strikes, and the physical charging of demonstrators—forcing even injured protesters back hundreds of metres. Such actions amount to collective punishment and the systemic suppression of lawful dissent, breaching the principles of necessity and proportionality established in the *UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials* (United Nations 1990: Pr. 4–5) and violating the rights to peaceful assembly, expression, and security of person under Sections 10, 15, 16, and 21 of the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 (Vic)* and Articles 7, 19, and 21 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (UN General Assembly 1966: Arts 7, 19, 21). As Vitale (2017: 118) and Della Porta and Reiter (2012: 8) observe, the deployment of “less-lethal” munitions in largely non-violent contexts functions less as de-escalation than as a performative assertion of state power, transforming public-order policing into an instrument of intimidation. When directed indiscriminately—through rubber projectiles, flash-bangs, and chemical agents—the effect is both inhuman and deterrent, exemplifying what Jefferson (2021: 55) terms the “disciplinary choreography” of crowd control, wherein protest itself becomes framed as disorder warranting force.

Yet in the aftermath, the same event was reframed as a story of police victimhood. 9News reported that “police were assaulted during violent protests in Melbourne,” describing debris, smoke, and “attacks on officers” (9News, 2025a; 2025b). But most of

the debris and smoke depicted in these images were the residue of weapons deployed on largely peaceful protesters. *SBS News* quoted police who claimed to have “had a gutful” of “left-wing agitators,” while politicians echoed this language to call for new restrictions on protest (SBS, 2025a; *The Indian Sun*, 2025). *Sky News* amplified these demands with headlines announcing a government plan to “ban face masks at protests following violent rallies” (*Sky News*, 2025). Across outlets, the same narrative cadence repeated: left-wing violence, police restraint, governmental necessity. The alignment was seamless.

This collaboration between police, media, and politicians consolidates an aesthetic regime of domination: it dictates what may appear, who is visible as subject, and who is rendered threat. The inversion is structural, not incidental. As Jacques Rancière writes, politics begins only when “the part of those who have no part” becomes visible (2004:30). The police–media apparatus functions precisely to foreclose this visibility—to maintain the distribution of the sensible through which domination presents itself as order. What is called “law and order” is the visual arrangement of obedience itself.

Through this lens, even the state’s aggression becomes moral performance. *News.com.au* led with outrage over a “deranged police officer effigy” burned at a protest, displacing focus from police violence to the feelings of the institution (*News.com.au*, 2025). The symbolic offence of an effigy eclipsed the physical

injuries inflicted on demonstrators. The state's monopoly on violence thus extends into the symbolic domain: it claims exclusive right to be wounded.

Each outlet rehearsed the same rhetorical choreography. The crowd becomes threat, the protester suspect, the police both victim and guardian. The syntaxes of neutrality—"tensions flare," "violent clashes," "heavy police presence"—perform alignment under the guise of balance. The aesthetic fiction of equivalence equates anti-fascist resistance with the fascism it confronts. In this inversion, opposition to hate is reconstituted as hate itself.

At every protest, the asymmetry of force reveals the state's moral orientation. The police line always faces the anti-racist crowd, never the fascists. This orientation is not logistical but ideological: a choreography of power that transforms solidarity into danger and domination into civility. Through this recurring spectacle, the state performs neutrality while visually enacting allegiance. The media completes the reversal: in frame after frame, the police advance on anti-racists while far-right groups remain behind them, static, rendered nearly invisible. Each headline reproduces the aesthetic of equivalence—the moral flattening that turns resistance into disorder.

The apparatus does not end with representation; it extends into policy. Following October's protests, calls for "tougher laws" against "violent demonstrators" (The Indian Sun, 2025) converged with judicial precedents restricting protest rights, as

seen in New South Wales' crackdown on Palestine Action Group activists (SBS, 2025b). The cycle is complete: the police exercise violence, the media aestheticises it as protection, politicians legislate its repetition. Violence becomes image; image becomes justification; law becomes performance.

As Foucault reminds us, "visibility is a trap" (1977:200). The protester's body, once captured within the frame, becomes the object of both surveillance and spectacle. Judith Butler extends this: "to appear is to be implicated in the field of power that conditions appearance itself" (2015:35). The protester's visibility thus oscillates between being weaponised and erased, between being seen and being seen only as threat.

Against this, the aesthetic of action must assert counter-visibility: an ethics of appearance that refuses both erasure and incorporation. It must confront not only the state's use of force, but the state's aesthetic monopoly on truth.

The Western Media Aesthetic: Structural Bias and the Aesthetic of Violence

The apparatus that fuses policing and media in Australia is not anomalous; it is a local manifestation of a planetary regime of seeing. Western journalism, long presented as the safeguard of truth, functions as the aesthetic arm of imperial order. Its neutrality is not absence of position but an aesthetic of violence —an image of reason that conceals the machinery of

domination. The same visual and linguistic techniques that turn repression into “crowd control” and protest into “chaos” structure the coverage of global struggle. The moral asymmetry visible on Melbourne’s streets mirrors the asymmetry of Western vision itself: the gaze that renders Palestinian resistance illegible while aestheticising Western power as civility.

Abeer Al-Najjar and Bouziane Zaid identify this as an *ethical collapse* in Western journalism—a transformation of “reporting” into a mode of political participation that “dehumanises Palestinians and downplays, if not disguises, the live-streamed mass killing of civilians” (Al-Najjar & Zaid, *Third World Quarterly*, 2025:2). What passes as objectivity is a moral alibi: the visual rhetoric of balance deployed to stabilise domination. Their study describes a “post-truth visuality” that aestheticises atrocity through form—passive voice, euphemism, and tonal restraint—thereby transforming complicity into professionalism (Al-Najjar & Zaid, 2025:7).

Dina Matar extends this analysis through the notion of *habitual media*—the repetitive, unexamined routines through which Western outlets reproduce empire’s epistemic violence (Matar, *Third World Quarterly*, 2025:1). These habits are not exceptional propaganda but the daily performance of the imperial gaze. Through repetition of familiar imagery—rubble, weeping mothers, men with guns—Palestinians appear not as agents but as atmospheres of suffering (Matar, 2025:4). The epistemic war

is fought not only with bullets and borders but with adjectives, captions, and editorial tone.

Both studies converge on the same revelation: Western media's power is aesthetic before it is informational. Its visual economy allocates empathy, credibility, and grief according to colonial hierarchies. The "objective" image is not neutral; it is a weapon of legitimacy. Every headline that frames invasion as "conflict," every caption that names an Israeli child but counts Palestinian bodies, extends the empire's aesthetic of order.

This aesthetic of violence is maintained through institutional discipline. The dismissal of an ABC journalist for reposting a Human Rights Watch report on Gaza revealed how internal censorship polices even the faintest deviation from the hegemonic frame (Mohamed & AFP, Al Jazeera, 2025). In the UK, over one hundred BBC staff accused their employer of pro-Israel bias and suppression of reports documenting civilian massacres (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2024). Within the U.S., *The Intercept* and *Novara Media* have traced editorial interference that privileged Israeli military talking points while erasing Palestinian testimony (*The Intercept*, 2024; *Novara Media*, 2025). Such actions expose the media institution as what it has always been: a corporate organ of the state, violence disguised as journalism.

Quantitative data confirm what lived witnessing makes clear. A Monash University study of Australian news platforms found that

Israeli deaths were personalised, while Palestinian deaths appeared as faceless aggregates described in passive voice (Carland, Monash Lens, 2024). A 360info review of global outlets reached similar conclusions: Western reporting privileges Israeli official sources and situates Palestinian suffering as environmental background, "a necessary consequence rather than a human tragedy" (Buoncompagni, 360info, 2024). The result is what Butler calls a hierarchy of grievability—where Western property, soldiers, and monuments become mournable while colonised bodies are reduced to scenery (Butler, Verso, 2020:37).

The Western media aesthetic thus operates as a *counter-aesthetic to action*. It stabilises perception, converting ongoing genocide into a consumable narrative. It presents violence as management and management as care. Its compositional grammar—cropped frames, euphemistic titles, selective sourcing—renders empire as reportage and dissent as disorder. Within this logic, journalism itself becomes choreography: an orchestrated display of moral balance masking structural partisanship.

Yet against this regime emerges the **aesthetic of action**—the field of visibility reclaimed through resistance. Where the Western aesthetic enacts violence as image, the aesthetic of action enacts resistance as movement. It is not representation but rupture: the collective re-entry of the excluded into the

frame of history. From Gazan citizen journalists filming under bombardment to protesters documenting police brutality in Melbourne, the camera becomes an instrument of refusal, a means of re-occupying the field of appearance.

If the Western media aesthetic transforms domination into spectacle, the aesthetic of action transforms testimony into presence. It refuses both erasure and assimilation, asserting visibility on its own terms. This is not mere counter-propaganda—it is the reassertion of life as aesthetic principle, the restoration of meaning to bodies the empire would render illegible.

The same structure that governs global perception thus returns locally. In Melbourne, the spectacle of moral inversion—the protection of monuments over lives—replays the global script. The coverage of the Hochgurtel Fountain protest is not an aberration but the microcosm of this wider aesthetic: violence masked as reporting, legitimised by corporations disguised as journalism.

Channel 9's Violent Erasure

Channel 9's coverage of the Hochgurtel Fountain protest exemplifies the media's complicity in state power. The report rewrites political dissent into apolitical vandalism. The slogans "*Free Gaza*" and "*Sanction Israel Now*" never appear in the text,

News / National

Vandals deface Melbourne's Hochgurtel Fountain and turn water bright red

3rd party ad content
By April Glover | 1:57pm Sep 21, 2025

An investigation is under way after a World Heritage-listed fountain in [Melbourne's](#) north was vandalised.

The Hochgurtel Fountain outside the Royal Exhibition Building in Carlton Gardens was defaced with graffiti and the water was turned bright red, police said.

Red paint was also splashed onto figurines in the middle of the fountain.

and the accompanying photographs are cropped so that the words cannot be seen. This is not neutrality but active silencing.

That the protest was reported at all is itself evidence of its necessity. After one hundred weeks of peaceful demonstrations, it took a spectacle of red water and graffiti to compel major outlets to notice. Yet even when forced to acknowledge it, the framing was corrosive. A 9News social-media video reduced the slogans to being merely "pro-Palestinian" and "anti-Israel." The massacre of sixty thousand civilians could not appear as genocide; it was translated into the language of rivalry. The dead become visible only through spectacle, and even then their visibility is immediately neutralised.

Most articles refused to mention the political nature of the act. They described “graffiti,” “red water,” “defacement,” but never the demands inscribed on the monument. Even when Gaza appeared, it was folded into the binary of *pro-Palestinian vs anti-Israel*—a frame that empties the act of urgency and collapses genocide into geopolitics. The demand—sanctions, an end to complicity—was erased so completely that the event could be reported without ever saying *why* it happened.

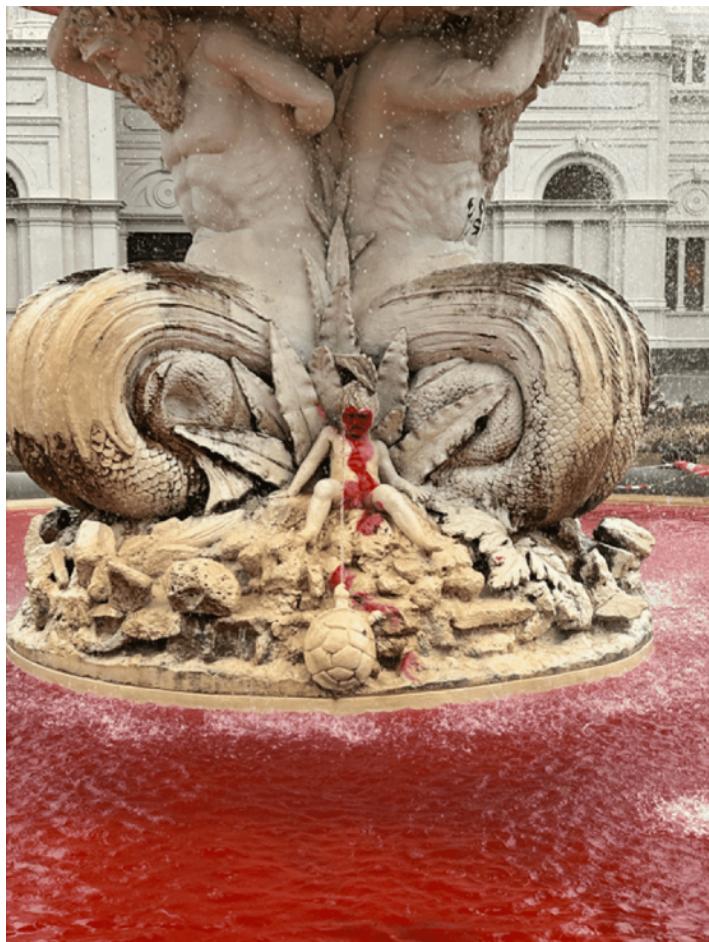
This erasure exemplifies a wider pattern in Australian media. Outlets repeatedly displace the outrage of genocide into the outrage of vandalism. The moral frame inverts: the fountain becomes the victim, not Gaza. Property is made grievable while Palestinian life is denied that status. As Judith Butler (2020) reminds us, grievability is the measure of whose lives are allowed to matter; Channel 9’s framing renders concrete mournable and human suffering invisible.

The Hochgurtel Fountain itself is not innocent. It is a colonial monument—a celebration of extractive wealth and imperial civility. Its sanctity is manufactured through the same circuits of corporate philanthropy and *ziocapitalism* that bankroll Australia’s museums today. To dye its water red was to expose the blood beneath its white stone, to transform an imperial emblem into a surface of testimony.

What Channel 9 performs is a violent semiotics. Systems of media and policing converge to determine what counts as

meaning. Graffiti is recoded as crime rather than critique; the call for sanctions deleted so that viewers are asked instead to care for heritage. This is the violence of erasure: to deny speech its political content, to protect monuments while refusing to acknowledge the dead.

White cement is made to matter more than brown bodies



Legal Testimony as Counter-Aesthetic

The reports of Melbourne Activist Legal Support (MALS) expose the structure of repression with clarity and detail. In its *Annual Report 2024*, MALS documented repeated breaches of human rights standards, including “multiple failures by Victoria Police to respect the role, independence and safety of legal observers” and the use of “potentially lethal weapons on protesters” (MALS, 2024). Across multiple mobilisations—including Palestine solidarity rallies, anti-fascist counter-demonstrations, and the Disrupt Land Forces campaign—MALS recorded “excessive force, arbitrary detention, and the obstruction of legal observers and journalists” (MALS, 2025a; 2025b).

Their *Statement of Concern* on the policing of the March for Australia counter-rallies noted that police “kettled counter-protesters” while allowing far-right participants to move freely, creating “a dangerous double standard that privileges right-wing mobilisation and criminalises dissent” (MALS, 2025c). Their *Submission to the United Nations Universal Periodic Review of Australia* stated that Victoria Police “continues to use tactics that breach international human rights standards,” including unlawful arrest, excessive force, and intimidation of observers (MALS, 2025d).

The most recent MALS report—published after the Global Sumud Flotilla protest on 2 October 2025—documents the event of my own arrest. Around 500 protesters marched from the State

Library to Flinders Street Station in solidarity with Palestine. MALS legal observers were present throughout. After most participants had dispersed, police “used force to disperse and make arrests of the small group that remained.” The organisation described this as “excessive and escalatory” (MALS, 2025e).



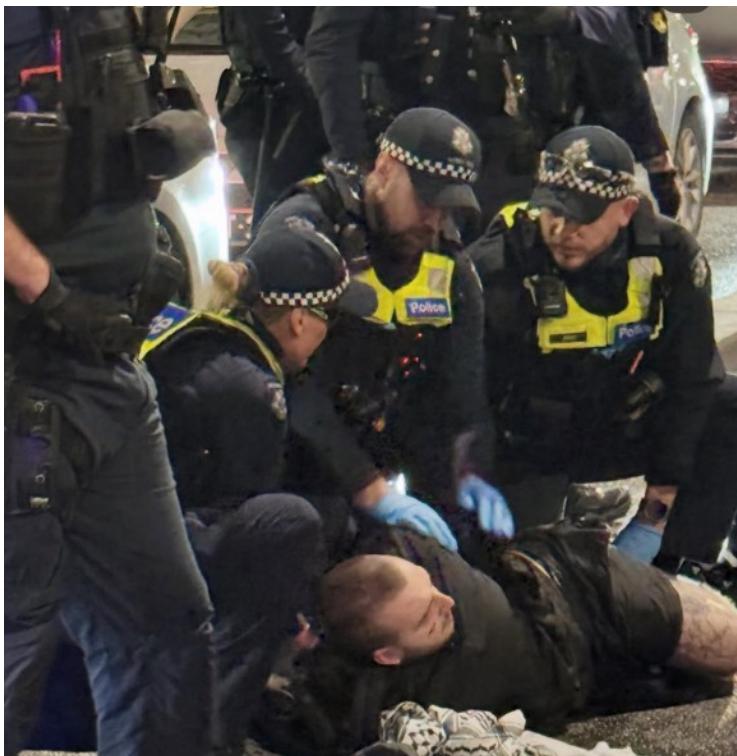
Under the section titled “2 – Violent Arrest,” the report records my arrest in detail. Four officers held me face-down on the ground—two kneeling on my shoulder and thigh—while legal

observers noted that I was not resisting. My jacket hood was pulled over my head, obstructing my breathing and the officers' view of my position. When I was lifted, blood was visible on my face. Despite posing no threat, I was handcuffed, which MALS described as an "unlawful use of force" when not necessary (MALS, 2025e).

The accompanying images show exactly what the report describes: one officer kneeling on my upper back, another on my leg, my face pressed to the asphalt, my hood covering my head. What MALS lists in procedural language—"excessive force," "unlawful restraint"—was experienced as suffocation and loss of control. The pressure on my back made it difficult to breathe; the hood trapped heat and air until breathing itself became struggle. The body was no longer symbolic—it was the site where power was applied and recorded.

Weeks later, a group of police investigators came to my home, saying they were investigating me for "*assault on police*." The accusation reverses what occurred. The officers who used violence against a peaceful protester sought to recast themselves as victims. This is how institutional power maintains its narrative: by converting its own force into allegation. I am now working with lawyers to defend myself and to pursue accountability for police misconduct.

MALS's documentation turns this event into record. It translates individual harm into civic evidence. The image of my hooded



body on the ground is not only proof of repression but a refusal of erasure—a counter-image that asserts visibility against institutional denial. Through its methodical witnessing, MALS transforms an act of violence into a document of public concern.

Testimony, in this sense, is not representation but counter-aesthetic. It reclaims the field of appearance from the state by grounding it in lived experience. What was once contained as spectacle returns as evidence; what was private pain becomes part of a collective archive of resistance.

Embodied Praxis and the Collapse of Reflexivity

In this confrontation, reflexivity—the institution's prized mode of critical distance—collapses under the weight of embodied risk. What was once conceptual becomes material; what was once critique becomes survival. The aesthetic of action no longer describes art that comments on politics but the lived collision of bodies with power. The protester's body becomes medium, the site where visibility and vulnerability converge.

This collapse is dialectical rather than tragic. As Adorno wrote, "Art's truth appears guaranteed precisely by its denial of any meaning in a world that has made itself meaningless" (*Aesthetic Theory*, 1997:132). Here, the denial of meaning is no longer formal but corporeal—the refusal to accept the state's claim to order. The protest reclaims the sensuous as political terrain, redistributing the sensible through presence, defiance, and collective care.

The act of standing one's ground amid tear gas and mounted charges becomes a composition: a choreography of resistance performed in real time. Each raised banner, each body holding a line, transforms visibility itself into insurgent material. Against both the neoliberal aesthetic of virtue and the militarised aesthetic of domination, the aesthetic of action asserts the dignity of appearance—the right to exist, to be seen, to resist erasure.

Art as the Refusal to be Erased

The repression of protest is not incidental but systemic—a visual economy of state power. The police enforce and the media aestheticise the same order of appearance. Violence becomes image; image becomes justification. The monopoly on force is mirrored by the monopoly on representation. Against the soft aesthetic of virtue that governs the university through civility, the state deploys the hard aesthetic of domination, and the media acts as its lens. The aesthetic of action thus encounters its limit: reflexivity gives way to exposure, critique to risk.

To stand in this field is to witness the collapse of mediation itself. The protester's body becomes the site where visibility and vulnerability coincide—the point where art, politics, and ethics converge. Each act of appearing, each collective refusal to disappear beneath the haze of tear gas and flashbangs, becomes the work itself.

The aesthetics of action exist within this struggle. They are forged not in the studio but in the streets—in the moments of shared risk, defiance, and care that exceed representation. Here, art sheds its frame and enters history as living praxis: an artwork more worthy than any paint or canvas.

The Aesthetic of Action: *ANTIFA NAARM GUIDE BOOK*

ANTIFA NAARM was made within asymptotia—where critique loses its distance and art must operate inside the conditions it names. The zine inhabits the immediacy of protest, refusing



FIELD GUIDE

representation in favour of function. Its form arises from necessity: an artwork that organises, shelters, and circulates rather than displays.

The opening statement, "*there is no antifascism without decolonisation*," situates the work within the unfinished struggle against colonisation, locating antifascism inside Aboriginal resistance to state violence. This decolonial grounding frames solidarity as orientation rather than inclusion: the recognition that collective safety depends on Indigenous sovereignty.

Across its pages, ANTIFA NAARM transforms aesthetic labour into political infrastructure. A definition of fascism and

POLICE

PUBLIC ORDER RESPONSE



Introduction: What is fascism?
(Already fluent in fascism? skip ahead.)

Fascism is not only a relic of the past. It is a system of power that thrives on nationalism, racism, sexism, institutionalised violence, the state, and reactionary movements work together to suppress dissent, protect capital, and enforce social hierarchies through fear.

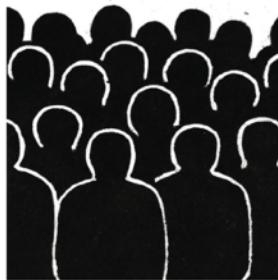
In Australia, fascism is tied to the history of colonisation. The foundations of this country are built on stolen land, genocide, and segregation. The political institutions of the state, the media, the police, and institutions of the church, the enforcement agencies to uphold white supremacy and reinforce inequality. Fascist groups feed on this imagery, using nationalist myths and racial hatred to justify violence against First Nations peoples, people of colour, and trans communities, and anyone who resists.

If you are opposed to racism, authoritarianism, and oppression, then you are already antifascist. "Antifa" is simply short for antifascist: people who refuse to stand by while fascism grows.

Antifa is NOT a central organisation, nor a terrorist group as the media portrays. It is a PRACTICE – a commitment to collective resistance. It is people coming together in solidarity to defend each other, to resist oppression, and to confront fascism wherever it appears.

Resistance is not optional – it is survival. Stand together. Resist fascism.

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS



The collage includes several sections from the zine:

- TOP LEFT:** A section titled "FASCISM AND THE POLICE" with a large graphic of a police officer.
- MIDDLE TOP:** An article titled "ANTI-FASCIST TACTICS" with a QR code and a logo for "MELBOURNE ANTI-FASCIST COORDINATING COMMITTEE".
- MIDDLE CENTER:** An article titled "SKILLSHARE TOURSHEET" with a diagram of a person holding a shield.
- MIDDLE RIGHT:** An article titled "VICTORIAN ANARCHIST LEGAL NETWORK" with a logo of an eagle.
- RIGHT SIDE:** An article titled "INFINITE GROUPS STICK TOGETHER" with a graphic of two people hugging.
- Bottom Left:** An article titled "POLICE" with a photo of a police officer.
- Bottom Center:** An article titled "THE STORY OF A PROTEST" with a logo for "ANTI-FASCIST RESISTANCE".
- Bottom Right:** An article titled "ANTI-FASCIST FIELD GUIDE" with a graphic of a hand holding a shield.

antifascism reframes both as structural conditions rather than ideological exceptions—fascism as the collusion of state, capital, and patriarchy; antifascism as the ethics of mutual defence. The zine's pedagogical rhythm—sections on *What*

Makes a Good Protest, affinity groups, black bloc formation, umbrellas, police repression, and legal support—renders strategy as a visual language. It teaches through clarity: minimal design, procedural tone, and reproducible scale. Every diagram and caption acts as infrastructure for survival. Clarity becomes an ethics; repetition becomes discipline; instruction becomes poetics.

But every collective appearance provokes repression. The aesthetic of action always encounters the aesthetic of order—the state's choreography of control. Riot shields, formations, and “less-lethal” weapons compose a rival aesthetic system: violence rendered procedural. *ANTIFA NAARM* mirrors and inverts this grammar. Its “Uniform of Resistance” diagrams turn the police schematic against itself, reorganising the geometry of power as a geometry of care. Anonymity becomes equality; visibility is repurposed for defence.

The zine’s pages on *Police: Public Order Response* and *OC Spray: Weapon of the State* aestheticise bureaucracy against itself. By reproducing the visual syntax of institutional manuals, the work exposes the aesthetic of domination embedded in administrative rationality.

The work adapts from image to circulation, from object to operation. Reproduction is not derivative but strategic; anonymity is not erasure but survival. The zine survives through its use, not its display.



**Long sidearm batons (left)
& Extendable ASP batons (right)**

Extendable batons are carried by all operational officers. Long batons used in crowd control contexts.

Potential for misuse: significant. Used as threat or to force compliance. Victoria Police Operational Safety and Tactics Training (OSTT) guides against head, face kidney strikes but they often used in overhead manner.

Dangers to public: impact trauma, strikes to the head, face, neck, abdomen, kidney region and spinal region pose high risk of serious injury, disability.



**Oleoresin capsicum
(OC- or pepper) spray or foam**

Releases a bright orange stream of (agent OC) capsicum foam for several metres but sprays if used in a wide arc. Range depends on size of canister.

Potential for misuse: significant. Used as threat or to force compliance. Used to clear crowds.

Dangers to public: severe skin and eye irritation, corrosion, transient sensation of heat, burning, stinging, irritation, (positional) asphyxia. If in confined area, restraints or AOD, transient transmision, blepharospasm, superficial pain and disorientation. Burning sensation lasting for 12+ hours.



VKS Pepper ball firearm

A 175 shot pepper ball semi-automatic rifle; Black with bright green or yellow cartridges or shoulder stock. Fires Kinetic Impact Projectiles (KIPs):

- a) OC (capsicum) projectiles the size of marbles or;
- b) Dye markers to brand people so they can be identified.

Potential for misuse: significant. Can be aimed to threaten or force compliance, used closely, aimed at head or can be rapid-fired into crowds.

Dangers to public: Blunt and penetrative injuries depending on range. Blindness, eye damage, bruising, burning sensation to exposed skin. Ricochet and unpredictable trajectories.



Baton round Launcher

A 40-millimetre launcher that fires a hard squash ball KIP (pictured right) that can hit a person within 50 metres.

Potential for misuse: significant. As threat or to force compliance. Used at close range or fired into crowds.

Dangers to public: Blunt and penetrative injuries, particularly head, neck and torso trauma, severe bruising, severe injury, permanent disability and death, (fatal at close range), blindness or eye damage. Ricochet and unpredictable trajectories.



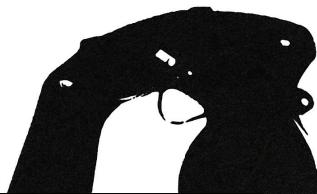
Stinger grenades

Can be rolled onto or thrown over a crowd, explode with light and smoke while releasing 32-calibre rubber pellets to wreat height with a range of five metres.

Potential for misuse: significant, will cause shock and panic in crowds.

Dangers to public: severe skin and pain in crowds, blunt or penetrative injuries, particularly head, neck and torso trauma severe bruising, death, (fatal at close range), blindness or eye damage, ear damage.

WEAPON OF THE STATE.



Former NSW Police officers plead guilty after kicking, capsicum spraying a naked woman in Western Sydney street



By Annie McPherson Courts

The 10 Jul

In short:

Two police officers have pleaded guilty to violently assaulting a mentally ill woman during an arrest in Western Sydney in 2023.

One of the officers sent the body-worn footage to a colleague, claiming "We caved her."

A court heard the officers repeatedly kicked and stomped on the woman while she was on the ground before capsicum spraying her to the face and genitals.



Its material production completes this circuit. Printed through RMIT's internal credit system and distributed at protests, the work redirected institutional resources toward collective defence —an unworking enacted from within the aesthetic of virtue. This gesture recalls Shellyne Rodriguez's response to the question of whether anything can be done "from the inside": she described stealing art supplies, painting banners for protest with museum materials, and treating the institution "like any 'bullshit job'" (Petrosiants & Rosales 2025: 23). Her actions articulate what

ANTIFA NAARM performs: the conversion of institutional labour into political material, the transformation of sanctioned resources into instruments of resistance.

Both gestures turn the aesthetics of virtue against itself, collapsing production into redistribution. The printer, credit balance, and paper feed become sites of appropriation; institutional capital becomes public infrastructure. What the university names as access becomes exposure, what it calls learning becomes insurgency.

ANTIFA NAARM is therefore not about protest but structured as protest. It performs the collapse of art's autonomy into praxis—the moment when design and defence converge. Within asymptotia, to make is to act; to distribute is to survive. The aesthetic of action endures precisely here: inside repression, inside the institution, turning its own materials outward until they reach the street.

Closing Notes

The unworking of the aesthetic disposition does not culminate in arrival but in endurance—the persistence of fidelity amid failure. To act within domination is to accept that every gesture will be absorbed, every resistance aestheticised, every refusal rehearsed by the very systems it confronts. Yet this is precisely where art's autonomy survives: not in purity, but in its continual

contamination; not in withdrawal, but in its capacity to persist as struggle.

The aesthetic of action names this fidelity without guarantee. It is the labour of remaining within contradiction—of acting while knowing that every act will fail, of refusing even as refusal becomes form. In this condition, art's afterlife is neither transcendence nor disappearance, but recursion: a politics of unworking that endlessly tests the limits of what can be said, seen, or felt. The gesture repeats because the world repeats; resistance reappears because domination renews itself through appearance.

Autonomy, if it endures at all, exists only as fidelity to this failure—as the ethical commitment to remain unfinished. To unwork the aesthetic is not to abandon form, but to expose its fragility; not to dissolve art into politics, but to allow their indistinction to become the site of thought. Every collapse, every repression, every absorption returns as another threshold. The aesthetic of action thus names both an exhaustion and a beginning: the moment when creation, having lost its distance, begins again within the ruins of its own possibility.

What remains is not art, nor politics, but the movement between them—the persistence of making as the practice of resistance.

Chapter 5

Essays

Opacity as Decolonial Resistance: Kiri Dalena and the Testimonial Memory of Colonial Violence

Kiri Dalena's art dismantles the imperial fantasy that visibility guarantees truth. Through gestures of erasure, fragmentation, and mourning, she reconfigures disappearance as both method and ethics—an aesthetic of opacity that refuses the colonial and authoritarian demand for legibility. Her practice exposes visibility itself as a juridical regime, a mode through which power legislates the human by rendering life observable, recordable, and therefore ownable. Against this ocular order, Dalena transforms absence into testimony, opacity into relation.

In *Erased Slogans* (2008) and *Monument for a Present Future* (2013), she constructs a counter-archive of disappearance—one that preserves the memory of violence precisely by withdrawing it from the gaze that instrumentalises it. Drawing on Glissant's "right to opacity," Mbembe's reflections on ruin and necropolitical visibility, Azoulay's critique of the archive, Foster's "traumatic realism," and Tadiar's reading of contemporary authoritarian optics, this essay argues that Dalena's work enacts opacity as decolonial resistance: an ethical interruption of vision's complicity with domination. Her practice shows that to remain unseen can be survival—and to fragment, erase, or mourn is to testify.

Colonial Visuality and the Politics of Erasure

In the Philippines, the entwining of vision and governance is a colonial legacy that matured into a technics of visibility. From the catechismal image of Spanish evangelism to the civic spectacle of American modernity and the monumental choreography of the Marcos era, seeing became a mode of sovereignty. As Flores writes, Imelda Marcos's cultural program imagined the nation as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*—"a new world deemed to be suddenly turning visible"—where beauty became the idiom of rule (Flores 2014:64). The Cultural Center of the Philippines thus transformed aesthetics into bureaucracy, recoding taste as the moral syntax of progress. What appeared as civilisation's refinement veiled the violence of exclusion: "the goodness and beauty of a historic race" justifying order through repression. Later, in Flores's writing on disappearance, this luminous regime collapses—its visibility inverted by artists who reclaim opacity as the last form of ethical resistance (Flores 2018; 2019).

This aesthetic of illumination extended a colonial genealogy in which the image functioned as both instrument and law—a visual theology that bound faith, commerce, and governance. Spanish evangelism installed the image as sacrament, teaching salvation through spectacle; the American period secularised this pedagogy, transforming visibility into the medium of modernity through advertising, cinema, and consumer display (Flores 2014:63, 68). Each regime refined vision into discipline,

binding moral virtue to optical legibility. By the Marcos era, this visual order matured into statecraft: the image no longer merely represented authority but enacted it, rendering citizenship a matter of appearing correctly. As Flores later observes, contemporary artists inherit this luminous violence not by reproducing its spectacle but by reversing it—turning disappearance, opacity, and absence into acts of political seeing (Flores 2018; 2019).

Mbembe's claim that "space is transformed into the raw material of sovereignty" clarifies this colonial scopic logic (Mbembe 2019:80). Visibility was not descriptive; it was juridical—a technology of governance determining who could appear as human. Dalena's art arises within and against this visual lineage. She turns the violence of sight back upon itself, transforming disappearance into the locus of political and affective knowledge.

Tadiar identifies this continuity in the Duterte and Marcos regimes, where "technologies of seeing and being seen" convert "exposure, confession, and death into signs of power" (Tadiar 2022:239). Visibility becomes necropolitical theatre: to be seen is to be captured by the state's demand for evidence. Dalena interrupts this circuitry by privileging opacity—what Mbembe calls "the fissure in the archive, the attempt to see from the shadow, as shadow" (Mbembe 2019:173). Her art mourns not only the disappeared but the epistemic violence of their

disappearance. The act of withholding becomes the act of witness.

Erased Slogans (2008): Opacity as Political Witness

Erased Slogans renders silence legible as resistance. Dalena reproduces archival photographs of 1970s protests against the Marcos dictatorship, removing all text from the demonstrators' placards. The protesters remain mid-gesture—arms raised, mouths open—but their slogans have been digitally excised. What remains are bodies of protest stripped of linguistic demand, yet the void itself speaks. The erasure does not negate history; it reveals the violence by which history demands legibility.

Glissant's "right to opacity," the idea of a subsistence within irreducible singularity (Glissant 1997:190), frames this act of subtraction. The blank placards withdraw from the colonial compulsion to "grasp" and categorise (Glissant 1997:191), refusing to perform intelligibility within the state's moral optics. The erased text becomes what Derrida (1995:14) calls the archiviolithic gesture: destruction as the archive's own truth. The viewer's gaze is thereby implicated. Azoulay critiques the modern "right to know," which she identifies as the foundation of the "right to see" (Azoulay 2008:305). Dalena ruptures that contract. The spectator is no longer authorised to decode meaning but is instead compelled into ethical relation. Looking becomes vigilance rather than mastery.

Flores names this condition an “aesthetic of disappearance,” in which “the visibility expected of the documentary is made to look inadequate” (Flores 2018:39). Dalena’s photographs reveal the inadequacy of both the image and the historical imagination it serves. They do not document but indict; they turn representation against itself. As Tadiar notes, the erasure “signals the continuing violence of representation itself” (Tadiar 2022:176)—the way visibility reproduces domination under the guise of recognition.

Erased Slogans thus refuses recovery. Its silence is not absence but testimony: a counter-memory that refuses to be rendered as proof. In the gap between placard and missing words, history trembles—a wound held open against closure.

Monument for a Present Future (2013): Fragmentation and the Memory of Violence

Where *Erased Slogans* enacts opacity through absence, *Monument for a Present Future* materialises it through dismemberment. The installation—broken clay, wood, and stone bodies strewn across the floor, illuminated by a looped video of funeral processions—reclaims the monument from its genealogy of mastery. The traditional monument rises skyward in marble certainty; Dalena’s collapses downward into dust and vulnerability. Her monument mourns without consoling. Foster argues that “truth resides in the traumatic or abject subject, in the diseased or damaged body … the evidentiary

basis of necessary testimonials against power" (Foster 1996:166). Dalena's fragmented figures perform this evidentiary resistance. They testify through incompleteness, turning trauma into an indexical aesthetic. The viewer must navigate a landscape of limbs and torsos, drawn into proximity with what the monument once sought to subsume: the body as wound. The accompanying video of mourners, looping between ritual and compulsion, embodies what Foster (1996:132) terms "the missed encounter with the real." The footage never resolves; its temporality mirrors trauma's persistence as repetition without redemption. Dalena fuses image and object into a single affective structure, in which grief becomes durational rather than monumental. The work does not commemorate the dead but sustains their presence as demand.

Mbembe describes empire's detritus as "the machine has aged and become a piece of rag, a stump, a skeleton, a phantom" (Mbembe 2019:170). The ruin, for Mbembe, is not mere decay but a mode of thought—the material persistence of history's unfinished violence. Dalena's bodies, simultaneously sacred and disposable, embody what he terms "the harvest of bones" (Mbembe 2019:161): mourning as the reanimation of what domination sought to annihilate.

Yet this mourning does not resolve into transcendence. As Sharpe reminds us, mourning is "hard emotional, physical, and intellectual work" (Sharpe 2016:11) that persists "in the wake" of unending loss (Sharpe 2016:17). Dalena's mourners perform this labour, extending the gesture of care to those who witness

them. To encounter *Monument for a Present Future* is to inhabit this wake—to become complicit in the labour of tending to the disappeared.

The monument's material language further subverts institutional temporality. As Azoulay reminds us, archives and museums are "the effects of a vast enterprise of destruction" (Azoulay 2019:180). Dalena responds by replacing permanence with fragmentation. Clay, wood, and stone are not sanctified as marble on a pedestal but dispersed across the floor—cracked, irregular, unmastered. Their resistance to unity refuses the monumental fantasy of coherence. In this broken syntax, matter remembers differently: not through endurance but through exposure, vulnerability, and touch. Here, decay and incompleteness become the grammar of testimony—what Derrida (1995:173) calls "fissure and breaking," an archiviolithic act that preserves through rupture.

Synthesis: Opacity as Decolonial Resistance

Across her practice, Dalena exposes the colonial grammar of evidence as an apparatus of domination. Sholette observes that "the archive continues to establish authority over who gets to speak and who has access to visibility" (Sholette 2011:91). Her erasures and fragmentations operate as internal sabotage, what Sholette terms "outlaw representation" (Sholette 2011:92)—a semiotic insurgency that "travels outside the law." Invisibility becomes refusal rather than exclusion, a politics "dedicated to

those who refuse the capture of their invisibility" (Sholette 2011:5).

Dalena's opacity thus reclaims the unseen as a space of agency. Within the colonial nomos, visibility was the precondition of humanity; Maldonado-Torres identifies this as "the coloniality of being," where the colonised are rendered inhuman through the ontology of light (Maldonado-Torres 2009:110–111). Dalena's withdrawal from legibility constitutes a reclamation of being itself—a right "to remain illegible to the law of the human" (Maldonado-Torres 2009:111). Her practice does not restore visibility to the oppressed but exposes visibility as the structure of oppression.

Escobar's concept of "non-representational politics," where "the distinction between representation and what is represented is obliterated" (Escobar 2009:396), helps clarify Dalena's refusal of mediation. Her works do not show the disappeared; they enact their continued presence as relation. The erased protester and the fragmented corpse are not images of the subaltern but participants in a relational ontology that exceeds representation. Absence here is not negation but the persistence of what the archive cannot contain.

Tadiar calls this "withdrawal from the law of evidence"—a refusal of the state's demand that atrocity be legible to count as real (Tadiar 2022:182). Dalena's art "refuses the archive's ownership of life and death" (Tadiar 2022:179) by transforming absence into living testimony. Flores asserts that "the moving image testifies to a disappearance but testifies nevertheless"

(Flores 2018:42)—a condensation of her aesthetic philosophy: to testify is not to show, but to sustain the tension between loss and persistence.

Through these gestures, Dalena performs what Azoulay calls potential history—a practice of being with the dead and the living “across time, against the separation of the past from the present” (Azoulay 2019:267). Her art does not monumentalise history; it reopens it. The erased and fragmented body becomes both evidence and refusal, both ruin and relation. This doubleness is the condition of decolonial witnessing: to see without mastering, to remember without consuming. Opacity, in Dalena’s practice, is not an aesthetic category but a political ontology—the ground upon which the human can be reimagined beyond the colonial economy of light.

Conclusion: The Ethics of Opacity

Dalena’s work insists that resistance need not appear to exist. From *Erased Slogans* to *Monument for a Present Future*, she constructs an ethics of opacity that contests visibility’s equivalence with truth. Her erasures and fragments transform silence into testimony, absence into the persistence of relation. By withdrawing from the archive’s demand for legibility, she exposes its violence and reconfigures its remains into what Tadiar names a “counter-archive of opacity” (Tadiar 2022:182). This counter-archive refuses the spectacle of suffering and the bureaucratic aesthetics of evidence. It embodies what Mbembe

calls the task of decolonial thought: “to see ourselves from the shadow, as shadow” (Mbembe 2019:173). In Dalena’s hands, shadow is not negation but ethics—a mode of attention to what survives the gaze. Her art renders mourning inseparable from justice, opacity inseparable from care. To witness, here, is not to reveal but to remain with.

By reclaiming disappearance as both wound and form, Dalena transforms the visual field into a site of resistance to its own authority. The unseen endures as testimony, not as the failure of sight but as its ethical limit. Through this limit, she articulates a politics of the incommensurable: a world in which opacity, rather than clarity, becomes the condition of freedom.

Forensic Materiality: Traumatic Residues in Géricault, Kaphar, and Hammons

In 1993, David Hammons exhibited *In the Hood*—a solitary dark green hood suspended from a white wall, severed from its body, its absence charged with lynched violence. Almost two centuries earlier, Théodore Géricault painted *The Raft of the Medusa* (1819), a writhing mass of bloated bodies rendered in rotting oil flesh. In Titus Kaphar’s *Behind the Myth of Benevolence* (2014) a portrait of Thomas Jefferson is set aside, unveiling the figure of a Black woman obscured beneath.

These works rupture historical continuity—transforming paint, canvas, and absence into scenes of traumatic residue that demand ethical witnessing. This essay argues that through

abjection (Kristeva 1982), rupture (Foucault 1972) and the traumatic real (Foster 1996)—these artworks transform materiality into sites of forensic reckoning—subpoenaing the viewer into complicity with history's unacknowledged crimes.

Colonial Indictment: Géricault's Oil Cadavers as Juridical Abjection

Théodore Géricault's The Raft of the Medusa (1819) transcends Romantic tragedy—it is a juridical indictment of French colonial violence. The painting stages the aftermath of the 1816 shipwreck, where survivors were left adrift, descending into cannibalism, despair, and death. Its materiality—sickly, muted oil hues—renders what Alhadeff calls the castaways' 'piquant trials with excrement and urine... lurid meals of human flesh' (Alhadeff 2008:276), transforming the linen canvas into a corporeal document of systemic neglect. In preparation, Géricault studied cadavers and amputated limbs (Greene and Moritz 1989, 00:05:55–00:06:00) to better embody 'the human corpse...the greatest concentration of abjection and fascination' (Kristeva 1982:4). His necrotic use of oil paint channels what Kristeva defines as 'the most sickening of wastes,' which we 'permanently thrust aside in order to live' (Kristeva 1982:4). The paint becomes forensic matter—not representation, but accusation—summoning the viewer to confront what colonial systems erase from memory.

These figures are not symbols; they materialise what Foster, drawing on Lacan, calls the traumatic real—an excess that ‘cannot be represented; it can only be repeated,’ rupturing the screen of history (Foster 1996:132). Trauma is embedded in the painting’s surface—not as narrative, but as residue: diseased, damaged flesh as ‘the evidentiary basis of important witnessing to truth... [and] testimonials against power’ (Foster 1996:166). Géricault’s oils do not simply depict tragedy—they repeat its logic. They do not mourn power’s failure—they indict the structures that produce it.

At the apex of the triangular composition, a Black man—modeled on Géricault’s Haitian assistant Joseph—waves toward a distant ship. As Alhadeff notes, his presence ‘politicizes flesh,’ casting a Black man as a ‘savior among dead whites’ (Alhadeff 2008:288)—a rupture in colonial visual propaganda. Joseph is not allegorical; he is a material indictment, redirecting the viewer’s gaze from Romantic spectacle to the racialised body as resistance.

In uniting the abject flesh of the dead with the racialised figure at its peak, Géricault fractures both aesthetic and colonial orders. The work synthesises trauma through form: oil paint becomes juridical matter; figuration, political evidence. What results is what Foucault calls a ‘discursive document’—a surface where history reasserts itself through what power seeks to expel (Foucault 1972). As he writes, ‘History is the work expended on

material documentation' (1972:6). The Raft of the Medusa is this document. It offers no relief—only confrontation.

Unveiling Archival Wounds: Kaphar's Epistemic Rupture as Material Evidence

historical representation—but Kaphar does so through a material-epistemic rupture, targeting the archive itself. Behind the Myth of Benevolence (2014) initially appears as a traditional neoclassical portrait of Thomas Jefferson, echoing Rembrandt Peale's 1800 depiction. But the illusion fractures: the painted canvas is pulled back, revealing the partially obscured figure of a seated Black woman—head wrapped, gaze unreadable. This is not symbolic layering but a confrontation with the visual architecture of historical knowledge. Jefferson becomes a veil—unstable and structurally complicit in erasure. This is what Foucault calls a 'discursive discontinuity'—a rupture that 'blurs the lines of communication' between dominant identity and erased reality (Foucault 1972:170, 175).

Nemeth and Willcox describe this as a 'material intervention' (Nemeth and Willcox 2023:196)—a formal disruption that weaponises medium against archival lineage. The exposed figure emerges through a compositional rupture, tearing through the Enlightenment portrait's mythic surface to reveal the violence it conceals. Jefferson's face is painted with linseed-oil-thinned white pigment, deliberately designed to fade over time (Nemeth and Willcox 2023:198). This instability performs what Foster

calls a ‘missed encounter with the real’—trauma that ‘rushes toward us’ only to remain ungraspable (Foster 1996:134). Kaphar doesn’t offer resolution. The fading pigment acts as forensic residue, mirroring how the archive itself breaks down: unstable, uneven, incomplete.

The woman resists symbolic closure. She is unnamed, unresolved, only partially visible. She inhabits what Kristeva defines as the abject: ‘what does not respect borders, positions, [and] rules’ (Kristeva 1982:4). Her presence literalises what Saidiya Hartman calls ‘the history that hurts’ (Hartman 1997:52)—not the spectacle of slavery’s violence, but its lingering afterlife. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman critiques the tendency to render Black suffering legible through ‘the white body positioned in the place of the black body’ to evoke empathy (Hartman 1997:21). Kaphar resists this. Rather than invoking empathy through whiteness, he confronts us with the Black presence dominant narratives have displaced. Her suspended visibility becomes what Christina Sharpe calls ‘the past that is not past’ (Sharpe 2016:10): a rupture in historical time, not a return to it. In doing so, Kaphar answers Sharpe’s call to ‘become undisciplined,’ exposing the archive’s ‘silences and ruptures in time, space, history, [and] ethics’ (Sharpe 2016:13–14)—an implicit Foucauldian rupture of the archive’s illusion of coherence.

As Darby English writes, viewers must ‘permit [the painting] to enter us... to understand ourselves as implicated’ (2007:241). That implication indicts us. ‘If we don’t amend history by making new images,’ Kaphar states, ‘we will always exclude the historically marginalized’ (Kaphar and Stanley 2019). Behind the Myth of Benevolence is not a portrait—it is a juridical site of rupture. A wound that accuses. A forensic summons to remember what the archive was built to forget.

Lynching’s Negative Trace: Hammons’ Forensic Hood Relic

Where Géricault shows decaying flesh and Kaphar ruptures archival façades, David Hammons presents only the trace a fragment of loss so traumatic it becomes unbearable. In the Hood (1993) is a solitary, dark green hood, severed from its sweatshirt and pinned to a white gallery wall. It hangs limp and empty—not a garment, but what Jones calls a “forensic relic in reverse,” marked by the gaping absence of the Black body (Jones 2011:203).

This vacant form functions as anti-monument and evidence. There is no figure, only a void—a negation that interrogates the wound it marks. As Hal Foster writes, if the lost object cannot be reclaimed, “then at least the wound it left behind can be probed” (Foster 1996:174). Hammons transforms a remnant of clothing into juridical matter, confronting us with systemic erasure.

This aligns with Kristeva’s abject: “what does not respect borders” and draws the subject toward “where meaning

collapses" (Kristeva 1982:4). In the Hood offers no narrative—only suspended absence that disrupts the gallery's assumed neutrality. The space becomes unsettled, haunted by what it cannot contain. As Kristeva writes, the abject is not filth but "what disturbs identity, system, order" (1982:4). Hammons's hood is this disturbance.

This material reduction reverses historical documentation. The hood exists, as Christina Sharpe frames it, in the wake—the afterlife of Black death disavowed by the dominant archive (Sharpe 2016). It is not a memorial but an accusation that keeps the wound open.

As Jones notes, many Black conceptual artworks are "anti-monuments... they do not narrate holistic, sanctioned... history; instead they live in the interstices" (Jones 2011:16). Hammons's hood is such an object, speaking through rupture and absence. Agamben, extending Foucault, calls the archive "a system of relations between the unsaid and the said." In the Hood testifies from that unsaid space (Agamben in Jones 2011:16).

Like Géricault's cadavers or Kaphar's veiled figure, Hammons materialises trauma through absence. The withheld body becomes the most visible thing in the room. It is not representation, it is trauma's negative imprint: a juridical surface emptied of subjectivity, saturated with implication. As Saidiya Hartman writes, "redress is itself an articulation of loss and a

longing for remedy" (Hartman 1997:77). Hammons offers no remedy—only residue.

Conclusion

From Géricault's necrotic realism, to Kaphar's archival rupture, to Hammons' absent trace, each of these works confronts the viewer not with narrative, but with aftermath—with what has been discarded, erased, or lynched out of view. Their materialities—oil, canvas, fabric—do not represent trauma; they enact it. Each becomes a site of juridical witnessing, demanding the viewer reckon not as passive observer, but as implicated subject.

Through Kristeva's abjection (1982), Foster's traumatic real (1996), and Foucault's discursive rupture (1972), these artworks transform material into forensic evidence. They offer no catharsis, no redemptive closure. Only residue, rupture, and the demand to bear witness. They subpoena the viewer—not to remember, but to testify. And in doing so, they do not merely present history's wounds. They reopen them

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